

THE MONKEY PUZZLE

J. D. BERESFORD

Rare Collection

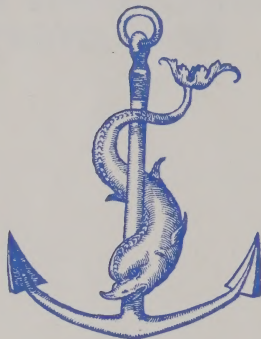
PR

6003

.E73

M6

1925



L. Tom Perry Special Collections
Harold B. Lee Library
Brigham Young University

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY



3 1197 22661 4359

ls

R. A. a. Beresford.

Lydyate House

Hamstanton

THE MONKEY-PUZZLE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE EARLY HISTORY OF JACOB STAHL

A CANDIDATE FOR TRUTH

THE INVISIBLE EVENT

THE HAMPDENSHIRE WONDER

GOSLINGS (A WORLD OF WOMEN)

THE HOUSE IN DEMETRIUS ROAD

THESE LYNNEKERS

HOUSEMATES

NINETEEN IMPRESSIONS

GOD'S COUNTERPOINT

THE JERVAISE COMEDY

AN IMPERFECT MOTHER

REVOLUTION

SIGNS AND WONDERS

THE PRISONERS OF HARTLING

LOVE'S PILGRIM

THE IMPERTURBABLE DUCHESS

UNITY

W. E. FORD: A BIOGRAPHY

(With KENNETH RICHMOND)

TAKEN FROM LIFE

(With E. O. HOPPÉ)

} A TRILOGY

323
54-5 no

THE MONKEY-PUZZLE

by

J. D. BERESFORD



LONDON: 48 PALL MALL
W. COLLINS SONS & CO. LTD.
GLASGOW SYDNEY AUCKLAND

Copyright, 1925.

Manufactured in Great Britain.

**THE LIBRARY
BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY
PROVO, UTAH**

UPB

CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
I. THE MONKEY-PUZZLE	I
II. POINTS OF VIEW	24
III. THE INCOMPATIBLES	57
IV. INSET	96
V. ABBY	115
VI. VARIOUS SIDELIGHTS	130
VII. DECORATIONS	157
VIII. ABBY'S MASTERPIECE	169
IX. BRENDA FAINTS	191
X. BRENDA'S THEORY	215
XI. ABBY SPEAKS	237
XII. NOLI ME TANGERE	257
XIII. THE MONKEY-PUZZLE	283

“HE remembered going to the vicarage with his nurse, when he was quite a tiny boy, and having his curiosity stirred by the sight of so very queer a tree. His nurse had explained it to him. She had told him that it was called a ‘monkey-puzzle’ because it was the only tree that a monkey could not climb. And they had gone right up to it ; and his nurse had laughed when he had pricked his fingers.”

I

THE MONKEY-PUZZLE

I

As he passed the french windows of the vicar's drawing-room, Tristram saw Mrs. Orpin and two other women, their heads close together, discussing their piece of defilement like three vast, intent blow-flies. As they talked, their heads bobbed and nodded with an effect of avid eagerness. They were so engrossed that they did not hear his step on the gravel.

He stopped as soon as he had passed the drawing-room windows. "Oh! but this is perfectly ghastly!" he said.

He had not spoken the words aloud, but he heard the smooth, sibilant sentence with painful clearness, as if it had been whispered confidentially to some attentive ear within himself. "Ghastly," he repeated in the same silent confidence, and knew that the listener disapproved the choice of word.

It was the same word that he had used to describe his sliced drive at the fifteenth that morning; and he had a brilliant visual image of the trajectory of his ball against the thin, burnished blue of the cloudless August sky. He saw it, now, as if the flight of the ball had traced a permanent line in its

passage, and admired, as he certainly had not at the time, the beauty of the curve. The ball had turned as it spun away towards cover-point, and had appeared in falling to describe a loop, which he automatically classified as that of a curtate cycloid.

But that was not the association his suddenly diligent mind was seeking, and instantly he saw himself riding his bicycle back from the links. And then he both saw and was himself, and both witnessed and re-suffered the spasm of passionate disgust he had felt when that roaring cloud of blue flies had risen from the ordure at the disturbance of his passing. "Bah! how ghastly," he had said.

Was there no other word in his vocabulary? And what was he doing here, standing stock-still on Orpin's drive recalling memories of his unclouded morning when he ought to be vindicating his wife's character in the vicar's study? With a feeling of stale repulsion, he recalled the three bobbing, avid heads he had seen as he passed the drawing-room window.

He had no sort of doubt that they had been talking about Brenda. About Brenda, good God; who was surely the cleanest person alive. Even if the things they said were true, she would still be infinitely cleaner than those—blow-flies.

"Oh! loathsome; loathsome," he murmured aloud, "the whole place will be a-crawl with maggots."

Unquestionably, he must be dreaming! that could not have been Tristram Wing speaking—not

the Tristram he knew. He looked across the sunlit spaces of the vicarage garden, and reflected for the first time that even in high summer that garden was gloomy. Instead of the bright foliage of deciduous trees, he saw the moribund, funereal tones of cypress, yew, deodar, and ilex. He decided that as soon as he reached home he would have the two pines in the shrubbery cut down. He would have no black trees in his garden. They were like rusty black bonnets, leaning towards each other, nodding and bobbing. . . .

But it might be that he had always been dreaming and was but now just awake? He had a new sense of coming, exposed and raw, into contact with the world. The anticipation of his interview with the vicar filled him with uneasiness. "The buttons will be off the foils," Tristram thought. "I shall have to tell him precisely what I think of him; and his wife; and her ghastly friends."

What did he think of Orpin? He knew only the outside of him, the long, horse-like face and the steel spectacles, the stooping shoulders and bony hands. Behind that, he had assumed the personality of the ordinary parson—a man who always behaved decently. But would any decent man have written that note, have made those shameful insinuations about such a lovely person as Brenda? There must be some quality in Orpin that he had never suspected.

Yet, when Tristram came into the study, the vicar looked just as he had always looked. Those red-rimmed eyes had not changed, nor that familiar

trick of drooping his head and looking at you over the top of his steel spectacles. Perhaps it was that habit which had made the lids of his eyes so red, like the eyes of a St. Bernard who had to look ahead while he kept his nose to the ground? Nor was there any difference in his voice. He said, "I'm glad you came to see me in person, Wing," in the same husky tone, half-interrogative, in which he gave out his texts—as though he were trying and watching the effect of his speech; searching you with his up-strained eyes while he kept his nose to the ground.

For a moment Tristram was tempted to reply that he could hardly come to see him *not* in person. The whole thing was so ridiculous. Well, he had come to speak the truth, and that was what he had better say.

"The whole thing is so absolutely ridiculous," he said, and sat down facing the vicar across the study table.

"Ah! You think it ridiculous," Orpin tried, staring hard, as if the scent were rather cold.

"From one point of view," Tristram said. "As a charge against my wife it is ridiculous. As an aspersion on her character, it's perfectly loathsome."

Orpin suddenly abandoned the trail and sat back in his chair, half closing his strained eyes and looking down at the row of his eight spatulate fingers laid on the edge of the writing table. "You don't believe? . . ." he commented thoughtfully.

"Good God, no," Tristram snapped contemptuously.

"I hope you're right. I sincerely trust you're right," was Orpin's too deliberate reply.

"He thinks I'm playing the stage-husband, defending my wife's honour," Tristram thought. And then a new idea presented itself, an idea that could never have occurred to him in those thirty-five years of his life which had preceded the reception of the Vicar's note. "He wants to believe it," Tristram decided. "He's seventy, and his wife is over fifty, and they both hate Brenda because she has got a clean, open mind."

"I assure you that I *am* right," he said, but his tone was indifferent. When he spoke he had become aware of himself again as the honourable husband of fiction.

The vicar was still studying his finger-tips, but now without the least movement of his head, his questing eyes turned up to a deliberate search of Tristram's face.

"You are aware of all the facts?" he asked.

"All of them," Tristram said brightly.

"You are aware," the Vicar continued, gazing out at him steadily from the loophole afforded by the gap between the top of his spectacles and his lowered eyebrows, "that she was seen to leave Mr. Mattocks's cottage after midnight, that Mr. Mattocks accompanied her back to your house, and that they—er—embraced—er—on the way?"

"I knew the facts, even down to the 'embrace,'" Tristram said. "I didn't know that they were seen. Who saw them?"

"That, unfortunately, I am not at liberty to

say," the vicar said, returning to the observation of his fluted, chalky finger-nails.

"Why not?" Tristram demanded.

"The information came to me in confidence."

"Through your wife?"

"I can answer no questions in that connection."

Tristram suddenly overflowed. "Look here, Orpin," he said. "Doesn't it seem to you that all this *spying* and *slandering* is an uncommonly dirty business for a priest to be mixed up in?"

A turgid wave of blood slowly suffused the Vicar's face, but he did not look up as he replied, "I was not aware that there had been any spying or slandering, Wing."

"Well, who the devil was on my land after midnight on Tuesday—Wednesday morning, that is? I've surely got a right to know that," Tristram said. "You know there's only one thing a fellow comes after in the woods at midnight, and that's—at this time o' year—rabbits. Isn't it? And, by the way, there's only one man I know about here who's likely to have been there, and that's Joe Popple, who has got a grudge against me for giving him two months last time, and whose wife is the worst gossip in the place. Well, as you won't answer questions, I shall assume, for certain, that that is the source of your information."

He paused, but, as the vicar made no movement, he continued, "You admit that Mrs. Orpin has been scandal-mongering with Mrs. Popple?"

"You've no right to make such a dastardly insinuation, Wing," the vicar replied. The blood

had got into his nose now, and it twitched slightly as he spoke.

"My God, Orpin," Tristram exclaimed. "You've been making the most filthy insinuations about *my* wife. Haven't I as much right as you have?"

"On the evidence——" the vicar began.

"It's on the evidence that I've convicted Mrs. Orpin," Tristram interrupted him. "Also, as I passed your windows just now, I saw Mrs. Orpin with two other women in your drawing-room. . . ."

His disgust was too great. He felt as if he wanted to spit.

"Eugh! The vileness, the filthiness of it!" he concluded.

The vicar pushed back his chair a few inches. "I think we had better conclude this interview, Wing," he said, with downcast eyes and an inflamed face. "You have lost your self-control, your—self-respect."

Tristram ignored that. He had got to his feet and gone over to the window. He turned back to the room again, as he said in a quiet, conversational voice, "You see, you don't understand my wife. You never could. She isn't like any other woman you've ever met. Her mind, for some reason that I can't pretend to explain, is not mucked up with a lot of filthy curiosities about sex. She's a great lover, but not of individuals as such; she's a lover of humanity. This fellow, Mattocks, for example; she's trying to 'save' him. He's a queer fish, with odd notions about all sorts of things. But Brenda has got an idea that he's a genius, and she's trying

to save him—for the world. She came in to me on Tuesday night, with her eyes shining, all in a glow, because she'd made him promise to work. She'd got what she calls a 'moment.' Been right up in the clouds. And she told me about that kiss, in the drive it was, close to the house, in the light of the full moon. I admit I had a twinge or two. Mattocks's hardly my sort, of course. But as for suspecting Brenda of the kind of thing Mrs. Orpin's always looking out for, why, the idea's simply laughable."

"With regard to Mrs. Orpin, Wing, I must protest . . ." the vicar said.

"Ach!" Tristram ejaculated, and suddenly flung the door open. He was immensely astonished to find Mrs. Orpin just outside.

The lady showed not the least embarrassment. "Oh! how do you do, Mr. Wing?" she said brightly. "I heard that you were here, and I was just coming to tell you and my husband that tea is ready."

"Tea? Oh! no. Impossible!" Tristram was wondering how much Mrs. Orpin might have heard of his last speech. Fortunately, he had not raised his voice. "I have been telling the vicar," he continued, "how disgusted I am that you and he should have condescended to listen to village gossip about my wife."

The smile vanished from Mrs. Orpin's face. She was still a handsome woman, with young brown eyes and abundant gray hair, but the expression of her mouth was at once sly and bitter.

"Really, Mr. Wing!" she exclaimed. "I don't think you understand our position at all. We *have* to consider the morals of the parish, and when an open scandal, an *open* scandal discussed by *every one* in the village, is brought to our notice, we cannot possibly overlook it. And it isn't as if this were the *only* thing we have had to consider. Your little girls can be seen from the lodge gates—taking their *sun-bath* . . ."

She paused slightly to emphasise her supreme contempt both for the word and the exercise, and Tristram snatched the opportunity to say,—

"The elder one was seven years old in April."

"The village boys go to the gate—on *purpose* to look at her," Mrs. Orpin said firmly. "No doubt if every one had such extraordinarily pure minds as Mrs. Wing, no harm would be done; but, unfortunately perhaps, the village boys——"

"Oh! may the village boys be everlastingly damned; and the village too," Tristram broke in. He could not bear another word. He walked past the shocked and blenching Mrs. Orpin and strode out of the house, leaving his hat and stick in the vicar's study.

He had done no good. He had, in fact, done harm; confirming the Orpins in their worst suspicions. They regarded him, no doubt, as the victim; and were probably excusing him at that moment for losing his temper. They would say that he had been very hardly tried. A nice man, in some ways, but criminally weak.

He had never liked the Orpins. They were the

kind of people who did not "approve" of this, that, and the other. They went about sniffing out things to disapprove of. And the vicar's sermons were the dullest ever. He had asked Elise last Sunday, in sheer astonishment, how she could keep her eyes on the vicar with such admirable attention all through the sermon. Elise had blushed and looked at her mother. "Tell him, dear," Brenda had encouraged her, and Elise had said, "You see, daddy, when Mr. Orpin gets a little excited his nose twitches, and I simply have to watch for it. It did three times this morning. I wish you could do it, daddy. Why can't you?"

He had remembered that, when Orpin's nose had twitched in the study just now. He had never noticed it before. So far as he could see that was Orpin's single attraction. When he got excited, his nose twitched. Mrs. Orpin had not even that recommendation.

When he arrived at the vicarage gate, he realised that he had left his hat and stick behind him. He decided to go back and fetch them. The Orpins would think he had gone home and would be nosing over his visit in the drawing-room—old Orpin on the hearth-rug "regretting" and "sincerely hoping" and being "honestly sorry for poor Wing"—the three women hanging on his words one minute and the next cackling together like a bevy of demented hens. Well, he would go back and give them a jolt—walk into the drawing-room unannounced, look round on them, and then calmly ask for his hat and stick. That was what they

wanted, a terrific jolt ; something to shake them up—like hell.

But he did not carry out his plan, not because he changed his mind, but because he forgot the Orpins before he reached the house. His progress was arrested by the sight of the very fine *Araucaria imbricata* that grew on the vicarage lawn. He had early associations with that *Araucaria*. He remembered going to the vicarage with his nurse when he was quite a tiny boy and having his curiosity stirred by the sight of so very queer a tree. His nurse had explained it to him. She had told him that it was called a "monkey-puzzle," because it was the only tree that a monkey could not climb. And they had gone right up to it and his nurse had laughed when he had pricked his fingers.

He stopped now, and regarded the tree with profound attention. What a gross libel on nature the thing was ! So stiff, so mechanical, so unyielding, without a single beauty of form or colour—a monstrous artificiality that might have been the product of some perverted, ingenious human mind setting out to imitate foliage in sheet metal. And the vile thing was impervious ! You couldn't attack it. It was defended, trunk, branch, and leaf. Touch it anywhere, and you were lacerated. Then people laughed at you for being such a fool.

He looked up and caught a fleeting glimpse of white faces at the drawing-room window.

They would think he was mad, standing there on the lawn staring at that hideous tree. He was certainly in a very queer state of mind, and there

was only one thing to be done—he must talk this all out with Brenda, at once.

2

He found her alone, having tea and reading Swinburne under the sycamore on the back lawn.

“Where have you been?” she asked, shutting her book and turning briskly to the tea-table.

“Vicarage,” he said.

“Sounds unlikely. Why?” she commented, as she poured out his tea. “Subscriptions?”

“Look here, B.,” he said, “I’ve had a frightful jolt. Something has got to be done about it. I’ve been in a most extraordinary state of mind.”

She did not speak, but her expression conveyed a question. Also, she looked rather amused.

“It’s this,” he said, and could get no farther. He was wondering what Mrs. Orpin would say if she could see Brenda at this very moment: leaning back in her basket chair, wearing a kind of loose and very short cretonne overall; and, he inferred, very little else.

“It’s which?” Brenda prompted him.

“You show your legs too much,” he said.

She did not move. “Quite nice legs,” she returned.

“Beautiful,” Tristram admitted. “I think that’s part of the trouble.”

She sat up quickly and pulled down her skirt as far as it would go. “What is it, Tristram?” she asked.

"Partly your legs and partly your behaviour," he said. "Mr. and Mrs. Orpin very strongly disapprove of both. Look here, B., why did you let Mattocks kiss you?"

"I told you. He was in a very exalted state of mind, and so was I. Why shouldn't he kiss me? I thought it would do him good, and it has. He has gone back to town—to work. He thinks I'm a kind of angel; which I'm not; but it's good for him to think it. And if that's the only way I can inspire him to work, why shouldn't I?"

"More tea," was Tristram's first response to this. He could not pretend to understand Brenda—he never had—but to be with her and to talk to her, after those Orpins, affected him as if he had come away from some fetid, over-heated room into the cool, sweet air of a mountain.

"No! Why shouldn't you?" he went on; "but I've got one doubt. Mattocks! Is he protected in any way? Is there any reason why he shouldn't fall desperately in love with you, not as a man falls in love with an angel from heaven, but with a fearfully attractive woman on earth. You are terribly attractive, you know, B."

"Does this come from the . . . the Orpinage?" she asked, disregarding his last sentence.

"Definitely *not*," Tristram said. "But I'll tell you about that in a minute. I want you to answer my question first, about Mattocks?"

Brenda had puckered her forehead into a frown. She did not often frown. "Do you think he might?" she asked.

"Certain, I should say," Tristram returned. "You're—you're desirable, you know, B."

"I don't pretend to regret it," she said; "nor to understand it—in a way. But no; Abby won't fall in love with me. He knows what I am—a little. He knows enough to tell him that it would be no good to fall in love with me—in the way you mean. No; that's all right." The frown had gone from her forehead and she leaned back again in her chair.

"Now, tell me about the Orpins," she said.

"He sent me a note," Tristram explained, beginning with the first chapter of Genesis. "I was down the garden, just mucking about, and Hull gave it to me there. I've got it here. I'll read it to you: 'Dear Mr. Wing, I very deeply regret to have to draw your attention to a matter that, as it concerns the moral health of this Parish, cannot be overlooked by me in my capacity of Parish Priest. Moreover, it seems to me on this occasion that there are some grounds, at least, for the scandals to which, even although I may not fully credit them, I cannot altogether close my ears. Wherefore I sincerely wish not only as your spiritual adviser but also as a friend, that you could give your wife a quiet word of advice to be a little more careful in her conduct. Unhappily, we are no longer living in the Garden of Eden.'"

"I like that touch about the Garden of Eden," Brenda commented. "Quite a neat literary allusion for the vicar—well?"

"Well, that letter gave me a most frightful jolt, B.," Tristram continued. "I'm damned if

I can tell you exactly why. I've been in the queerest state of mind ever since. I had a sort of vision just before I got into the vicarage. I kind of thought I'd been asleep all my life and just woke up. Anyhow, I let in to the Orpins—both of 'em—like blazes. They'd got all the story of you and Mattocks, kissing in the moonlight. 'Embracing,' Orpin said. Fact is, that swine Popple must have been after rabbits in the wood, seen you and Mattocks go by and followed you. Probably thought 'black-mail' would be more profitable than rabbits. I don't know. Anyhow, it's all over the village, and naturally Mrs. Orpin was one of the first to hear of it."

"What do the Orpins want me to do?" Brenda asked. She had listened without any sign of disturbance to his story, but there was a faint touch of anxiety in her voice as she put the question.

"We never got to that," Tristram said. "I was extremely rude to them both. Told them I was disgusted with them and things of that sort. Mrs. Orpin brought up the children's sun-bath exercises. Said the village boys came to the gate on purpose to look at 'em. And I said the village boys and the village too, might be everlastingly damned for all I cared."

"Oh! Tristram, you are a love," Brenda said. "And what then?"

"I came away and left my hat and stick in Orpin's study."

"Poor darlings," Brenda commented gently.

"Oh! no, B!" Tristram ejaculated. "They're not. Anything but that. There were two other

women in the drawing-room. I saw them as I went past. Mrs. Priestley, and, I think, Miss Latimer. They were all in a lump with their heads together, like ghastly great blow-flies over a bit of rotten meat."

Brenda raised her eyebrows in frank astonishment. "My dear old man," she said. "You must have had a jolt—and a vision. All this is very unlike you."

"It is," Tristram admitted. He had stretched himself out in his chair, his legs in a straight line, his hands in his pockets, his shoulders humped and his head bowed. "It is," he repeated, "and I'm aware of it; and not sorry. This thing has stirred me up, B. It may sound dashed incredible to you, but it has made me *think*. I've been taking things for granted all my life——"

"Including me?" Brenda put in.

"I'm not sure; but, yes, I rather think that certain aspects of you will have to be included."

"Such as——?"

"Such as—— No! I can't say it that way. Look here, old girl, have there ever been times when you felt as if you might almost despise me?"

She jumped up and came and knelt by his chair. "Never, never, my dear," she said.

"But I must sometimes seem a fearfully dull sort of dog, to *you*," he pleaded.

Brenda sat back on her heels and stared at him with a look that mingled inquiry with a touch of dismay. "You frighten me," she said, in a low, serious voice.

"Why? Don't you want me to wake up?" he asked. "I fancy it almost amounts to that. I—I—by God, you know, B, I believe I'm beginning to think. It's a new sensation."

She frowned, got to her feet, stood for a few moments with her hands clasped behind her, looking down at him, and then returned to her own chair.

"Then God help you, my poor darling," she said solemnly, "for you have a very difficult time before you."

3

They had been married for more than eight years, and in that time Tristram had shown no sign of beginning to "think" in Brenda's sense of the word.

She had been perfectly content. Her theory of life, an outrageously difficult one for most people, was founded on the principle that it was waste of time, and bad sense, to attempt to alter the character and habits of any one after he, or she, had grown up. With children it was a little different; you could, to a certain extent, direct.

And, since the mere statement of her theory was in itself a kind of propaganda, an indirect attempt to alter the theory—if he had one—of the person to whom the statement was made, she had never confided the essentials of her philosophy to Tristram. She lived her theory and he obviously admired and rarely criticised her. What more could she want, seeing that she also admired, and never criticised, him.

He had a mind, different in many ways from her own, but with certain qualities that hers lacked. He had taken honours at Cambridge in the mathematical tripos, and she respected his acquaintance with a science, the method of which was to her an unfathomable mystery. Whenever, in the earlier years of their married life, she had been tempted to criticise him, she remembered that he was a "wrangler." She would have liked to understand "how he thought," but she believed that she never could. He had once attempted to give her some idea of the theory of relativity, and left her extremely puzzled. She could not decide whether the thing were utterly beyond her powers of comprehension or whether, in a sense, she already knew more about it than he did. He had admitted that the mathematics were beyond him.

After he had come down from Cambridge, however, he had done no more mathematics. His father had been killed in a motor accident, and Tristram had accepted the management of the estate, as a matter of course. In that, he was like her. He accepted things. But his attitude towards them was different. He accepted them because he believed them to be right, because there was no alternative. She never regarded anything or anybody as being essentially right or wrong. They were interesting, that was all. And she wanted to understand them. To put them into definite categories meant to set up her own theory of life as a standard, whether of conduct or æsthetics, and that was contrary to the principle of her theory.

But if Tristram were by some queer chance to begin thinking in her sense, he was, she knew, in for a very difficult time. She had passed through it herself, between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. In those years, she had been a very puzzled child ; although with the particular kind of reticence that was characteristic of her, she had not confided the nature of her puzzle to any one.

She had found a way out, at last, by studying her father and mother, who never had agreed and never could. Her mother had a passion for what she generally referred to as the right people, a passion that ruled her life. She had, by diligence, come to know quite a number of right people ; more, in fact, than her husband could afford ; and spent all her time in continuing to know them.

Brenda's father had never been interested in people, whether they were " right " or the other kind. His chief interest in life was to be let alone. He read a great deal in a desultory, indefinite way, and as a child Brenda had believed him to be incredibly well-informed. He knew so many " odd things." In politics, he was supposed to be a Liberal—he was a member of the Reform Club—but he never discussed politics or appeared to take the least interest in them. He went to the club whenever he was not wanted by his wife, and sometimes when he was, but only to spend his time in the library or to play billiards. His fellow-clubmen and the right people said he was colourless and harmless. His wife often told him that he was a poor thing without energy or ambition.

Brenda, observing the home life of her parents with a shrewdness somewhat precocious at the age of seventeen, had decided that they were neither of them to blame save in one particular: each, absurdly, wished to alter the other. "Your mother," her father had said to her one day, "is always on the go. Pity she can't take life a little more easily." And her mother constantly accused her husband in Brenda's presence of being "totally devoid of ambition." They might have lived happily together, Brenda thought, if each had not so foolishly wanted the other to adopt his or her own conception of what life was for, and how to make the best of it. She had decided, then, that whatever mistakes she made, that should not be one of them.

She had been practising this theory steadily and with interesting success for two years when she met Tristram. She had simply and naturally fallen in love with him, and in due time as simply and naturally married him. There had been no obstacles. Her mother had accepted him as being of a sufficient degree of rectitude; and her father had liked him, and had, perhaps, cherished the vain hope that when their daughter was successfully married, he might be allowed greater freedom of action. "Brenda's future" had been used so often as a lever in those later years to keep him away from the club library. It would be so essential for her, her mother had urged, to meet the right people. In any case, he would save a certain amount of money. He would miss her, of course, but she was a queer child, and he had never been able to

understand her. Strangely enough, his wife had used the same words, although if he and she had compared notes they would have found that they did not in the least agree as to why she was queer or with regard to the particulars in which they failed to understand her.

And now, after loving and admiring Tristram for nine years, Brenda was suddenly faced with a new and entirely unexpected development in him. He was on the verge of beginning to *think* about things—in her sense of the word. She had no doubt that it was true. She recognised the symptoms. And she was uneasy on his account. When a man begins to think at the age of thirty-five, it sometimes goes hardly with him.

4

“A difficult time?” Tristram repeated. “I don’t quite follow that, old girl.”

Brenda made a large gesture with her arms, as if she would embrace the universe. For the first time for many years she was being embarrassed by her theory. She wanted to help him by giving him the benefit of her own experience. “Well,” she said, “when the walls of the house fall down and you find yourself confronted with the whole width of this very wide world. . . .”

He shook his head. “Oh! I’m not going as far as that,” he explained. “We’ll keep the walls up. I’m not anxious to explore the wilderness.

It's just this one problem that I must get right somehow."

"Which problem?" she asked.

"It's a bit difficult to state," he said; "but roughly it's this ghastly ignorance, or stupidity, or is it a kind of brutishness, of people like the Orpins—er—gloating over the possibility that you—you, of all people—might go off the rails with a chap like Mattocks. I want to understand why. If——"

"Oh! perfectly, darling," Brenda interrupted him. "Like Tennyson, only he realised what he was up to, and had no intention of bothering his head so long as he could write a pretty verse about it. You know—the flower in the crannied wall—how does it go, if he could know it flower and root and all, he would know what life and death is. Something like that. It's the same with you—and all of us. If you want to understand the Orpins' attitude, really understand it, you'll have to pull your house down; the house you've been building round yourself for thirty-five years. There's no other way. The point is: Are you prepared to do it? Personally, I have a strong feeling that I'd sooner you didn't."

Tristram was nursing his chin—he had a very good chin—and looking a trifle bewildered. "But look here, B," he said, after a moment's hesitation, "don't you want me to do anything about this filthy slander?"

"That's quite a different sort of rabbit, isn't it?" she asked. "But, in any case, why bother? I'll go and see the Orpins if you like."

"I don't like," he returned.

"Then let us leave it alone."

Tristram stood up. "No, darling, it's no good," he said, "I've just got to see this thing through."

She came and stood in front of him and laid her hands on his shoulders. "Even if you have to pull down the walls of your really rather beautiful house," she said. "Are you prepared for that?"

"I'll chance it," he said.

She sighed faintly. "Very well, my poor lost love," she agreed. "But you won't have much time this evening. You haven't forgotten, have you, that mother and father are coming by the six o'clock train?"

"I had forgotten," Tristram admitted. "How long are they staying?"

"Four or five days, I expect," she told him, but he made no comment on that. In his eyes was a look of vague abstraction, the kind of look she had seen in them when he had become interested in some casual mathematical problem that had been presented to him.

"Don't begin to think yet," she said, giving him a little shake.

He looked down into her eyes for a moment, and then bent and kissed her. "I'm not sure that I can help it, darling," he said. "By Gad, you know, this problem of the Orpins is rather fascinating. I shall call it the Monkey-Puzzle."

II

POINTS OF VIEW

I

LACEY FULLERTON, Brenda's father, was a tall, pre-occupied looking man with a natural gift for producing an effect of untidiness. He had gone bald and gray untidily, in patches; he had ragged eyebrows in which a few hairs had grown to an extravagant length; his long, thin nose was a little out of straight, and the pince-nez he could not do without, always a trifle askew. Moreover, the two sides of his figure were badly matched. The right arm and the left leg were longer than their fellows, and the left shoulder and right hip higher; not enough to attract the attention, but enough to be the despair of Savile Row. "You can only fit him," a famous tailor once said, "so long as he keeps in one position. Directly he moves, he stars all over like a broken window."

A less energetic or a less ambitious woman than Mrs. Fullerton (the one victory of Fullerton's married life had been to bar the hyphen his wife had, at first, aspired to. "My dear Charlotte," he had said, "the Fullertons have owned Fullerton for six hundred years. Lacey-Fullerton is a new name. It might be the name of a grocer." And she

had, on that occasion, seen the force of his argument), would have ceased to struggle with his appearance and let him hide himself in his club.

Charlotte Fullerton had begun with the idea—it had come to her the first time they met—that something could be done with him; and once she had conceived an idea she never again relinquished it. She had been known to straighten Lacey's dress-tie nineteen times in a single evening. Moreover, she never forgot that Lacey was an asset. His family had lived on the same Berkshire acres for six hundred years, and she was shamefully uncertain of the status of her great-grandfather. She was a Piggott, a Yorkshire Piggott, for general purposes; and she left it at that. There was a sturdy, yeoman sound about it that did very well, if she were pressed; but she made no boast of it. In appearance she was a tall, slender, rather faded blonde with cold blue eyes of immense resolution, sternly entrenched behind tortoise-shell-rimmed glasses. She was always beautifully dressed, and as a result of thirty years diligent application had achieved the right manner and could use it without thinking.

Nothing was said to the Fullertons of the Orpin affair at dinner that night, until the servants had left the room. Nothing would have been said then, if it had been left to Brenda. But to Tristram, speech had at last become essential.

All through dinner he had been seated opposite a delicious figure with abundant fair hair—recently bobbed, but it suited her—in a sea-green silk evening

dress with just one rope of pearls at her neck. He thought he had never seen her look so lovely. (He often thought that.) And the more he looked at her, the more his mind seethed. His mind, in fact, was rather like a very mixed stew, boiling much too fast, with the ingredients swirling and dancing, bobbing up at the sides and ducking down in the middle, and steadily getting tougher and tougher. And as soon as the dessert was on the table, he stuck out his handsome chin, looked at his mother-in-law, and said :—

“ Brenda told you about the Orpins ? ”

“ Your vicar or something, isn’t he ? ” inquired Mrs. Fullerton, who did not deal in Orpins.

“ I haven’t said anything to mother,” Brenda put in ; “ I wasn’t going to.” And she put her elbows on the table, stared thoughtfully at Tristram, and blew a perfect ring of cigarette smoke. She had deliberately acquired the art of blowing rings to please Elise, who was never tired of that exhibition.

“ What is it, then ? Something out of the way ? ” Mrs. Fullerton inquired, continuing, without any change of expression : “ Surely you’re not going to smoke a pipe, Lacey ? ”

“ They don’t mind,” Mr. Fullerton replied. “ No one here.” It was one of his apparently incurable perversities that he could, or would, smoke nothing but a pipe.

“ I can’t bear the look of it,” his wife said. “ And do put your bow straight. Well, what about your Orpins, Tristram ? What have they been doing that they ought not to ? ”

"Saying the most abominable things about Brenda," Tristram explained.

Mrs. Fullerton brought her tortoise-shell rims to bear on her daughter. "I suppose you've deserved it?" she remarked.

"Kissed a man, not Tristram, in front of the house at midnight," Brenda said.

"What sort of man?" her mother asked.

"An artist. His name is Mattocks. He——"

But her mother had turned back to Tristram. "You've no objection?" she asked him.

"None. None whatever," Tristram replied promptly. "B. told me all about it when she came in. Perfectly understandable. She's been helping him to work, inspiring him, and so on. That's all right. But just to show you the sort of people these Orpins are, they've mixed the whole thing up with another affair—taken objection to the children's sun-bath. They say the filthy village-boys come and stare in at the gate to see Elise with nothing on. And, well, the whole thing is unbearable."

"How'd they know? 'Bout Brenda?" Mr. Fullerton put in.

Tristram explained. When he had finished, his mother-in-law slightly pushed back her chair and sighed loudly.

"Of course," she said, addressing more particularly her daughter, "if you will do that kind of thing *here*, under the noses of those kind of people, you can only expect them to be shocked. They don't understand it any more than—than

your father understands how to sit through a meal without crinkling his shirt. Why you spend all your time shut away in this desert of a place is altogether beyond me? However, I suppose that's your own affair. Still, if you do stay here all the year round, I should have thought that even you, Brenda, would have had the good sense to conform, more or less, to the manners of what society you've got. I suppose these Orpins of yours are the usual sort of country parson and his wife?"

"I don't know," Brenda replied vaguely. "Is there a special sort?"

"What do you think, Fullerton?" Tristram broke in impatiently at this point, turning to his father-in-law.

"'Fernal people. I know 'em," Fullerton said, hunching his left shoulder and justifying the startling metaphor of the famous tailor. "Perfect genius f'r interfering in other people's business. Never can let any one alone. Had a feller like that at Fullerton for a time. Terrible chap. Wanted to convert people, me among 'em. I used to get through the hedge when I saw him coming along the road."

Tristram frowned. "I can understand that sort of fellow," he said. "After all, you know, it's a parson's job to convert people, isn't it? But this——" He broke off, and began again in a slightly higher voice, "What riles me is this deliberate nosing out of—of what they, the Orpins and their lot, assume is necessarily some kind of beastliness. They want to believe it's beastly. They do, really they do. It came to me to-day

in Orpin's study. I had a sort of intuition—never had one before to my knowledge. They were like a lot of ghastly great blow-flies looking for dirtiness, hoping to find it in the most unlikely places." He turned his flushed face to his mother-in-law, as if he entreated her to believe his incredible theory.

"Of course, I know," she said wearily. "All those sort of people are like that."

"Not all. I don't believe that," Tristram replied firmly.

Mrs. Fullerton slightly shrugged her shoulders. "The best thing you and Brenda can do is to give up this place and take a decent house in town," she said. "Brenda won't shock the kind of people we know."

"As if I wanted to shock anybody," Brenda murmured.

"Then why do you do these ridiculous things?" her mother asked.

"Because I feel like it," Brenda said. "Poor Abby was rather an exception. I'm afraid I got too emotional about that. But he *is* a genius, and at the time it seemed so splendid to get him to give up drink and drugs. I'd—I'd have done almost anything. But about the children—well, I'm sure it's good for them, not only to have a sun-bath, but also not to begin with all sorts of coddlings and false modesties. Elise knows something about sex already, and she's perfectly sweet about it; so frank and open; so very much *not* what the poor little village children are with their peerings through the gate."

"Very modern, of course, and that sort of thing——" Mrs. Fullerton began, but her son-in-law interrupted her.

"That's it, B," he said. "I must make that point when I see the Orpins again. I must get them first of all to realise your attitude about all this sort of thing——"

He stopped abruptly as he became aware that all three of his listeners were watching him with an amused smile.

"Well, why not?" he asked.

"Oh! my darling boy," Brenda said; "because it is my attitude they so much object to. Why? Why, because it isn't their own."

"Well, then," Tristram returned, "it just resolves itself into this: Is your attitude or theirs the right one? And as I don't see that there can possibly be two opinions about it, I propose to convert them to yours."

"I knew this thinking of yours would land us in the most awful difficulties," Brenda said in a low voice; and then her father, touched on his tender spot, carried on by saying:

"Yes, yes, wouldn't try and convert 'em if I were you, old boy. Infernal nuisance to both sides, and no good, no good at all."

"But, hang it, sir; they're trying to force their own filthy opinions down *my* throat," Tristram expostulated.

"Only one cure for that," Fullerton said. "Get your throat out of their way. Don't give 'em a chance to force anything down it."

"And are they, after all, the least worth bothering about?" Mrs. Fullerton added.

Tristram was stroking his chin. "In a way, I suppose they aren't," he agreed, after a moment's pause. "I'll grant you that, if you like, to start with. But, Lord knows why, this thing has got hold of me, and I want to understand it. . . ."

"Root and flower and all," murmured Brenda.

"Yes, I suppose so," Tristram agreed.

"Well, what about bridge?" Mrs. Fullerton asked.

2

Tristram was in the garden when the post arrived at eleven o'clock the next morning, and Brenda did not take his letters out to him until an hour and a half later. Her delay was due to the nature of the letter she had received from Abby Mattocks (his parents had misnamed him Abelard)—and the manner of its delivery.

Abby's handwriting was picturesquely illegible, and taking no chances with the official intelligence, he always "printed" his addresses in large block capitals. Furthermore, he invariably used violet ink. No one, having once seen an envelope addressed by him, could ever mistake the identity of the writer—certainly not Moyle, the postman of Zeal-Afford. Brenda had seen him coming, and had gone to meet him.

It was not so much the fact that Abby's glaring advertisement was picturesquely displayed on the

top of the pile, as the searching glance of Moyle, when she took it from him, that first made her uneasy. Moyle, of course, was a local preacher and deserved consideration, both under that head and for his own flagrant respectability. (Nine of Mrs. Moyle's children had survived the perils of infancy.) She could understand the reason for the tactful reproof he administered by the unusual curtness of his manner and the stern inquisition of his stare. What troubled her was the inference that there was probably not a grown man or woman in Zeal-Afford—to say nothing of the boys with the physiological curiosities—who did not suspect her of immorality. They had never liked her. They regarded her frankness, her plain impulsive speech, as “foreign.” For Tristram they had a hereditary respect, continually sharpened by the knowledge that all their cottages were his property. Now, no doubt, they were sorry for him, but hoped that he had learnt his lesson and would get rid of her as soon and as decently as possible.

The contents of Abby's letter added enormously to her perplexity. For the first time in her life, she felt strongly inclined to hide something from her husband. And she spent the better part of the morning in her own room—the children were with Miss Ingleby—greatly tempted for once to tell something less than the truth to Tristram and write a bald lie to Abby.

She had conquered that temptation before she went out into the garden, but it returned to her when Tristram greeted her by saying :

"I've been expecting you all the morning, B. Nearly came to fetch you once or twice. I've been thinking about what I was saying to you yesterday afternoon; and the more I've thought about it, the more it seems to me that I've been slacking and wasting my time."

"Don't," Brenda pleaded.

"Must," he returned. "I've got to—to justify myself; because I *have* got a head, B, I have really; only I've never bothered to use it. Been too happy and contented, I suppose, with you and the children and this place; every damn thing I wanted; and no ambitions. But . . ."

Brenda was sitting, almost crouching, in one of the two big basket chairs he had had brought out. (It was so like him to have had the other put there for her!) Now, she lifted her head and held out her hands to him. "Come here, darling," she said.

He went over to her, took her hands, stooped and kissed them, and then sat down by her in the other chair. "I can think better when I'm not actually touching you," he explained. "What were you going to say?"

She pondered that for a moment, bending forward and running her fingers through her mane of fine hair. "You remember what I said yesterday," she began. "You thought you could stop at this one puzzle—the monkey-puzzle, as you called it—but you're beginning to see, now, aren't you, that you can't do that? Already you're wanting to know your plant, root and flower and all."

"It joins on to a lot of things, in a way," he admitted. "But don't you want me to think, dear?"

She sighed deeply. "I don't know. I don't know," she said. "I've got a premonition, of sorts. I—I'm afraid it will so dreadfully upset you—us."

"Can't see why it should," he protested. "You must have thought a deuce of a lot, B. Damn sight more than I ever suspected. And hang it, old girl, how are we going to be pals if I don't keep up with you?"

She turned and looked at him with a shade of reproach in her widely opened blue eyes. "Haven't we been pals?" she asked. "Always? Up to now? There was never anything I couldn't tell you—that I wanted to tell you."

"And you didn't mind all that side of you, the thinking side, being shut away from me?" he asked.

"No!" she said. "It always has been shut away from everybody. I've never wanted to talk about it. Tristram! I'm going to make a confession to you. I *can't* think. I never have been able to—not in your way. I can't take up a problem and worry it out. I just feel things. I know things inside; and then what you would call 'rationalise' them, afterwards. And—to get back to what we're talking about—I believe this new thinking of yours will put you farther away from me. We were nearer to each other yesterday morning than we are now. Once you begin to examine things, to look for

reasons, you will be far less my kind, less in sympathy with me than now ; when you take everything for granted as being all for the best. Because, really, you know, that's the root of *my* faith."

"I can't believe that altogether, old girl," Tristram replied, after a short silence, during which that look of abstracted speculation had come into his eyes. "I'm certain that my waking up to the meaning of this affair and—and what it leads to, can't possibly separate us in any sort of way. How I see it is——"

But Brenda with a little spasm of impatience cut him short.

"I know, darling. I can guess," she interrupted him. "And there's something I've been wanting to tell you ever since I came out, and I can't wait any longer. I had a letter from Abby this morning, and Moyle had put it on the top of the mail, and when he gave it to me his look condemned me straight to the pit. I don't mind that, but it shows, doesn't it, that other people, all the village people probably, feel just as the Orpins did about that kiss on the drive?"

"That must be seen to," Tristram said, flushing.

"You're going to convert Moyle and the rest of them to my, to our, theory of life?" Brenda asked him, with a flash of irony.

"I'm going to try," he replied stolidly.

Brenda leaned back in her chair with an air of resignation. "And there's still another thing," she went on. "Abby wants to come back to-morrow."

"But he only went away a few days ago." Tristram's tone not less than his sudden frown showed quite clearly how he regarded this proposal.

"I know; but he says," Brenda continued, producing Abby's letter from her waistband, "that—er—I'll read the passage to you—he says: 'I'm afraid of London. The air is haunted. I felt temptation greet and gloat over me as I came into Paddington station. I gripped myself, then—I have been gripping myself ever since. I have kept your image before my eyes. But even to-day, I feel that your thoughts have forsaken me.'"

Brenda sighed and paused in her reading to interpolate—"God bless the man, of course they have," and then continued quickly: "'And with every breath less of your guardianship, the evil thing draws its cursed net a little closer.'"

"Oh! well, there's some more of that," she concluded, letting the letter fall on to the grass. "I couldn't read quite all of it. The point is that he says he isn't strong enough *yet*; that he wants to come back for another month at least; that he thinks he can hold out in London for a week, which is a record anyway, and shows how much good I've done him; but that he must see me again soon."

"Hell!" was Tristram's sole comment.

"Why?" Brenda asked.

"It's no good, B," he said. "I don't like it. I don't like Abby, really. And it makes my skin creep to think of his being near you, and—and all that."

"You don't mean——?" she suggested.

"I'd trust you anywhere with anybody," he affirmed. "And I think it's simply magnificent of you to have done what you have for him. But I definitely do not want him back. It—it will complicate everything."

"I knew you'd feel like that," she replied quietly.

"Well, old girl, honestly, do you want him back yourself?" he asked.

"I still believe, in spite of this letter, that I can cure him," Brenda said.

"By love—and kindness?" Tristram inquired, with a marked pause after the word "love."

"Yes. By love," she agreed simply.

"I simply can't stand the idea of his *touching* you," Tristram said impatiently.

"But——" she began.

"I know, I know," he broke out. "I'll be honest. I've been thinking about that, too. You see, he had gone away, and I thought he was gone for good. But, now that there's a chance of his seeing you again, I'm jealous—jealous *for* you. You're too clean and sweet to be touched by him. And though I know how you think about him, I don't know how he thinks about you; and you don't know either, B."

Brenda made no reply. She was sitting very still in her chair, staring straight out in front of her.

"Well, do you?" Tristram urged her, getting to his feet again.

"I suppose his thoughts of me, like most of our thoughts about everything, are—mixed," she said

quietly. "And I ought not to have kissed him. I've only seen that this minute."

Tristram stood looking down at her, but she continued to stare past him. "Well, that about settles it, I should think," he said. "You can't have him back now."

"How can I do anything else?" she asked in a low voice.

"But, good God, B, surely you must see——" Tristram ejaculated, leaving all the more obvious aspects of the case to her imagination.

"I see two things more particularly," she said, still with the same air of serene detachment. "The first concerns me and Abby. No, don't interrupt me, dear. Sit down and listen. This has got to be said.

"In the first place, then, I took on this job of saving him from himself, because I know—you know, too—that he has real genius. It's his genius that destroys him. When he can't paint or think, create in some way, he is too weak to resist the temptation of some artificial stimulus. He feels that he must *do* something. So he either makes love to the nearest possible woman; or drinks or takes drugs. He's not a dipsomaniac, and drugs haven't got hold of him yet. While he was at the cottage, he never drugged; and never drank to excess. When he wasn't working, I was able somehow or other to cure his megrims, although he never made love to me. And it wasn't just because I was a new sort of woman to him, I have a power over him—of quite a different kind from the influence

I have with you. However, never mind that. The point is that I do honestly and sincerely believe that I can save Abby ; but that I can't do it unless he comes back to the cottage. And if I feel like that, how can I let my purely personal inclination stand in the way. I'll admit that I don't altogether want him back. It complicates the already difficult situation ; and it will, obviously, make you unhappy. But can I let Abby go under for those reasons ? Can I ever be quite happy again if I do ? ”

Tristram had listened to her without giving any sign of displeasure. There could be no doubt that he was doing his best to give this side of the problem his careful and, as far as might be, his detached consideration. And when she paused, he said quietly, “ All this was under the first head, I think. The second is—— ? ”

Brenda sat up and leaned towards him, suddenly full of life and passion. “ The second concerns you, my dear boy,” she said, looking half-defiantly into his eyes. “ You've championed me ! You've protested the absurdity of the Orpins' suspicions to their faces. You're eager to convert them and the rest of the village to *our* point of view. And the first step you propose to take is to admit that the Orpins and the villagers are perfectly right, by barring Abby's return. Is that consistent ? Is it even remotely reasonable or logical ? If you're going to stand for this principle of freedom ; if you're convinced that there could never be any suspicion of immorality between Abby and me, hadn't you better begin by some demonstration of

your convictions? Wouldn't it be better, even as propaganda, than refusing to let Abby come within two hundred miles of me? If your principle is worth fighting for, run up your banner and flaunt it. If it isn't, don't, for goodness' sake, try to thrust it upon any one else.

"Now, darling, think that over for a bit, will you? I heard the second gong, five minutes ago."

"You're mighty logical, you know, B," Tristram said, as he slowly and thoughtfully got to his feet. "More logical over this than I've been."

"After the event, dear," she said. "I come to my conclusions first and find reasons for them later—if necessary."

"Anyway, I admit that you're right in this," he said, as they made their way back to the house. "Dead right, only——"

"Only!" she repeated, with a laugh. "But your 'only,' my dear, is the crux of the whole business. My conviction came first, as I said, and it's so easy to justify it afterwards. But how often, even with men, can conviction come as the *result* of reason? My argument may be unanswerable, even your clever head mayn't be able to find a flaw in it, but you're not convinced, not all through. There are no flaunting banners about you, yet; are there, beloved? Just a little flag with 'I Believe' on one side, and 'Only' on the other."

Tristram's laugh was a little rueful. "You're right on the spot this morning, B," he said.

3

He had promised to take his father-in-law round the estate that afternoon. Fullerton seemed to enjoy Tristram's society. Also, he had a mild taste for other people's estates. His own place in Berkshire had been let since 1917 to a rich man who had taken it in a great hurry and at a high price to escape the air-raids, had found it to his liking and wanted, now, to buy it, hereditary acres, prestige and all. Fullerton, whose finances were in a rather precarious condition, was not unwilling to sell, but Charlotte had set her face against any such sacrifice of status. To be a Fullerton without the ancient estate, was only one degree better than being a Yorkshire Piggott.

"Charmin' place this of yours," Fullerton remarked sadly, as he and Tristram paused on the bridge over the brisk little river that ran through the plantation and separated the gardens from the Home Farm. He invariably made the same remark at this place, and the associations produced it automatically; but to-day it had a new note of sadness and regret.

Tristram had been deep in thought as they had walked in silence down through the gardens. Brenda had been so right. He saw that. She had convinced his reason; but he was still reluctant to face the prospect of Abby Mattocks's return to Zeal-Afford. He could see that the proper, reasonable thing to do was to have him back, and

he was trying, patiently and honestly, to face the prospect cheerfully, and, if possible, willingly.

He came out of a fit of deep abstraction to the realisation that his father-in-law appeared to be making a speech, and that the theme of it was peculiarly appropriate to Tristram's own thoughts.

" . . . make the sacrifice," Fullerton was saying; "and we ought to—no question about it."

"But it must be made freely," Tristram put in. "Even when you've convinced yourself that it's the right thing to do, there's still one more difficulty, perhaps the greatest, to be overcome. As B says, it's no good waving a flag with 'only' on the back of it."

"I don't follow you," Fullerton said. "I haven't the vaguest idea what you're talking about."

"You were saying something about making a sacrifice, weren't you?" Tristram asked, now fully awake.

"Yes, as I was explaining to you, of Fullerton and all its associations," his father-in-law replied. "Came to me rather sharply, seeing you all so happy here, in this charmin' place of yours. Charlotte, of course, is dead against selling, but she doesn't realise what my position is—my financial position. I can't see any way out, no way at all. She'll have to make the sacrifice. We've quarrelled over everything for thirty years, and she's always had her own way. This time she'll have to give in, have to—or face the bankruptcy court. She's all for a mortgage, to carry on, as she says. She's no head for finance, none whatever. So I thought

I'd put the thing to you, my boy. You've got a head on your shoulders, and you can explain to her far better than I can—never can keep my temper with her, never have—that a mortgage'll only make things worse for us, in the long run. Y'know even with the rent Quilter's payin', there's no profit. All eaten up by taxes, to say nothin' of repairs. And interest on a mortgage means another permanent charge on our income. I'm sure you could make her see that, my boy, couldn't you? Plain enough, in all conscience."

There was a pathos in his father-in-law's unusual eagerness that touched Tristram's ready sympathy.

"But do you really want to sell, yourself, sir?" he asked. "Because if I could help you, in another way, I'd love to do it."

They were still standing side by side on the bridge, looking up the river to where, just above a little waterfall, the overhanging arch of trees widened about a shallow pool to let in a full flood of yellow sunshine. Fullerton had been leaning forward, resting his hands on the waist-high parapet of the bridge, but now he stood upright, lifted his head, and began to button up his coat; a gesture that was somewhat weakened by his failure to observe the just opposition of button and buttonhole.

"Take it from you like a shot, my boy," he said. "Like a shot. Don't think it's that. But, to be quite honest: yes, I've made up my mind to sell Fullerton. It's a responsibility—a drag. And, these days, what does a place of that sort *mean*? 'Tisn't as if we lived there. No, personally, I'd

sooner sell ; make a wrench and be done with it. With what Quilter's offering we should be, comparatively, in clover. Ah ! and by the way, Charlotte doesn't know the figure, not exactly. I—I halved it. She's got no head for figures ; and I told her seventeen thousand. Seventeen thousand, my boy. If you're going to be good enough to explain this to her, you'd better stick to that. Save explanations."

"Yes. Rather. I'll do my best," Tristram agreed, without enthusiasm. He disliked the least suspicion of chicane.

"Good ; good. Thank you, my boy," Fullerton said, wrestling vainly with the last, homeless button on his coat. "I think you ought to be able to persuade her. Shall we go on now ? And, by the way, this button. . . . Charlotte——"

After Tristram had re-buttoned him, they continued their pilgrimage to the Home Farm.

But, although the sun continued to blaze in the sky—they were in the middle of the drought of 1921—and there was no possible fault to be found with the arrangements and management of the Home Farm, Tristram was aware of a most unusual sense of depression, of an endless array of difficulties and entanglements stretching out ahead of him. He had known nothing like it since he had resigned his Staff-appointment in 1917 and gone into the trenches. Even then he had had a far better time than most of his fellow-officers. Indeed, it seemed, looking back over his life, that he had always been extraordinarily protected ; sheltered

and preserved from all the troubles and discomforts of life, great and small.

That thought made him uneasy. Had he, he wondered, been spoilt ; spoilt by life, by his unfailing good luck in everything that he undertook ? If not, how was it that he was grouching now (he accused himself of "grouching"), at the prospect of such relatively small unpleasantnesses as the persuasion of his mother-in-law (if only Fullerton had not lied about the amount of the purchase-money), and the probable return of Abby Mattocks—a genius without doubt, but in some subtle, pervasive way, unclean physically and morally. Perhaps that was why the Orpin blow-flies had settled with such repulsive alacrity ? And they were not the only scavengers to scent the carrion. There was Moyle, the postman, as representative of one side of village opinion. But all that side had a nose for these things. Far less comprehensible and far more unsettling, was the inference that Mrs. Upchurch, the clean, decent, honest wife of the tenant of the Home Farm, was in the same camp.

Yet, this afternoon, there could be no question that Mrs. Upchurch was "on her dignity"—a favourite phrase of Brenda's in this connection, and one that showed how often she had seen a side of the farmer's wife that had been quite unfamiliar hitherto to Tristram himself. Her gray, calm eyes met his with an expression of reserve and suspicion that he had never seen in them before ; he missed the usual warmth of her greeting. And when they had been inspecting the cool fragrances of the

dairy, he had caught her watching him with what looked uncommonly like a touch of ironic condescension, the sort of look that says, "Poor fool." He had met her glance and held it for a moment, and then she had turned away with something in her gesture that was as near disdain as was permissible in the wife of one of his tenants.

That gesture hurt him. The second of Mrs. Upchurch's two sons—the one that had been killed, the other was at St. Dunstan's—had been in his own regiment; and when he had come home in February, '19, Mrs. Upchurch had wept on his shoulder.

It was with no idea of making a confidant of his father-in-law, but rather because he had to overflow somewhere, that Tristram said as they were going back to the hall,—

"That fellow Mattocks wants to come back to the cottage. Brenda had a letter from him this morning."

"Wouldn't do at all, of course," Fullerton replied, hoping to dismiss that subject off-hand. He had still a few more words to say with reference to the coming interview between his deputy and the difficult Charlotte; and this would probably be his last opportunity. "Out of the question. But, my boy, apropos——"

"It isn't," Tristram interrupted him. "It's a question that's got to be settled to-day; and I'm very undecided about it. You see, I do honestly agree with B, that we ought to have him back. It seems to me, quite obviously the right thing to

do. At the same time—well—I don't know if you noticed Mrs. Upchurch's manner to me this afternoon ? ”

“ Can't say I did,” Fullerton said with the curt air of a man who will be glad if you'll get it over as soon as possible.

“ Well, whether you did or not, it was there,” Tristram continued. “ And so far as I can see, the whole village is up in arms. Infernal impudence on the part of the village, damn 'em ; but if we have Mattocks down here again, Lord knows what'll happen.”

“ My dear boy,” Fullerton said, stopping in the middle of the path—they were already within sight of the house, and those final instructions had yet to be given—“ take it from me that the thing's absolutely out of the question. You couldn't possibly have the fellow back. Couldn't possibly. Altogether apart from the scandal in the village. No, no ; put it out of your head. And, now, my dear boy, there's just——”

But Fullerton, as usual, was out of luck, for at that moment Hull, Tristram's head-gardener, came across the lawn with an effect of meaning to speak to his master immediately that showed all over him.

“ Half a tick,” Tristram apologised to his father-in-law. “ Yes, Hull ? What is it ? ”

“ Excuse me, sir,” Hull said slowly, and as it were carefully, “ 'tis a letter I happened to see, by the chairs, under the sycamore. I put it in my pocket, to give you, knowing 'twould belong to you or the mistress. 'Twas not a half-hour since

I found it." And from his pocket he produced a letter, written in violent, violet ink; regarding Tristram as he tendered it to him with a frankly inquisitive stare.

Tristram met the stare with another that also held a question. In his mind was a vague memory of Abby's phrases, something about Brenda's image having been always before him and of her being always in his thoughts. And he was conscious of the fact that his confrontation of Hull was that of two equals meeting and silently attempting to measure each other. Hull and himself were not, for that moment, master and servant.

"Oh! thanks," Tristram said in a cool voice, resuming with the words his authority of employer, but deigning nevertheless to an explanation. "Your mistress was reading it to me this morning. Nothing else?"

Hull touched his cap. "Thought I'd better give it you myself, sir," he said, as he turned away.

Poor Fullerton was, mentally, wringing his hands.

"Mattocks's letter to B," Tristram remarked, as he put it in his pocket. "He writes the most extraordinary letters!"

Fullerton shook his head dismally. "I'm sure I shouldn't like the feller," he said, adding quickly, "But we'll talk about that later on. If you could just give me your attention one minute, my boy, before we get back to the house? I only wanted to say . . ."

Tristram, with that letter squirming—it was so, he was aware of it—in his pocket, politely did his

best, but his face undoubtedly lacked the alertness and interest that the occasion demanded.

"Odd, very odd," Fullerton thought, "that any one should be unable to realise the immense importance of this forthcoming interview! Why, the whole of his future depended upon it!"

"Yes. Of course. Certainly. I follow you," Tristram repeated mechanically, while another voice within him was saying, "Thought he'd better give it to me, himself, did he? Hull! Damn him! Probably meant it decently enough. Nothing of the blow-fly about Hull. But they don't *understand*, all these people. Surely if one could make them *understand*? . . ."

4

Fullerton was always keenly aware of his ill-luck. Men of his temperament usually are. It is so fatally easy for them to drift into unfortunate situations, and easier still to account for disaster by a reference to the inscrutable methods of Fate. And it is true that some men drift into harbour, even if the majority drift on to the rocks.

The mistake Fullerton had made in the present instance, a mistake that he had made most days of the week for the past thirty years, was the under-rating of Charlotte's intelligence. She was not a clever woman, and she had not, as her husband had emphasised that afternoon, any head for finance. But she was quite capable of "twice-two"; and she knew her Fullerton far better than

he knew his Charlotte. On this occasion she completed her sum with a triumphant and indubitable "four," when she saw her husband and her son-in-law in conference on the drive; and did not need the further proof of Fullerton's sly glance in her direction when he entered the drawing-room at tea-time.

Her method, as usual, was simple and efficient. She opened the topic herself, over the tea-table, by saying,—

"I suppose Ralph has told you, Tristram, that he has some idiotic notion of selling Fullerton?"

"Yes, we were talking about it, on the bridge, this afternoon," Tristram admitted. What else could he say?

Fullerton was biting his nails, and Charlotte paused to remonstrate with him under that head before proceeding:

"I hope you agree, Tristram, that that would be a perfectly imbecile thing to do."

"Unless it were absolutely necessary, certainly," Tristram agreed; "but I rather gathered that it was."

Charlotte's face was set into the stubborn mask that her husband and daughter knew so well. "It is *not* necessary," she said. "And I shan't allow it."

"Your mother prefers the prospect of the bankruptcy court," Fullerton remarked to Brenda.

"As if," Charlotte replied, "Tristram would ever let it come to that."

"Shouldn't dream of asking him," Fullerton put in.

"Why not?" Charlotte evidently meant to get the situation plainly stated. "I should have *no* hesitation. Suppose it were a matter of five or ten thousand pounds," she went on, turning to her son-in-law, "I imagine that you would be able to help us tide over?"

"Oh! yes. Of course," Tristram agreed.

Fullerton got to work on his nails again. At that moment Tristram was, in his opinion, still a good fellow, but one greatly lacking in finesse. Surely he might have suggested some difficulty in raising a sum like that? He did not seem able to realise, in the least, the tactical possibilities of the situation.

"Then don't let us have any more nonsense about bankruptcy courts," Charlotte continued with determination, dismissing that aspect with a nod. "The plain facts are that if we accept this man's offer of whatever it may be—Ralph said seventeen thousand, but of course it's more than that—the place is sold and can never be recovered. Whereas, if we can tide over——"

"Tide over! Oh! tide over, my dear Charlotte," Fullerton almost screamed, getting to his feet, and waving his hands. "And every time we tide over we get deeper into debt. Deeper and deeper. Can't you realise—can't you at all understand that—that every time we borrow—we reduce our income—and—and—oh! it's obvious, obvious to any one who has the least idea of figures—any kind of head—that—oh! . . ." He paused, staring with a look of intensest exasperation at the stubborn mask of his wife's face, and then fled from the room.

"He'll feel better after dinner," Charlotte said quietly when he had gone; "and how is *your* little affair going, Tristram? Did you see your Orpins this afternoon?"

"No. No, I didn't try to," Tristram said. He had no intention of discussing that "little affair" with his mother-in-law just then."

"Better. Much better not," Mrs. Fullerton approved. "It'll all blow over; and in future Brenda will have to be more careful. It serves no purpose to go against public opinion in these things. If you want to be peculiar, you should live in London, where nobody notices it, or cares if they do. Now it's cooler I think I'll go for a little stroll in the garden."

When they were alone Tristram and Brenda looked at one another and smiled.

"Ever since I was old enough to remember," Brenda said, "they've gone on like that. But wouldn't you think that after thirty years——"

She left the sentence in the air, being, herself, a little uncertain of the remedy.

"They'd have learnt to agree about things?" Tristram suggested.

"Or separated," Brenda added.

Tristram seemed to give the advisability of that solution his best attention for a moment or two before he said,—

"I don't believe in that, B. It's shirking. I've got a sort of feeling that it's always best to face things."

She turned to him with a look that held the

shadow of an anxiety. "Are you thinking of Abby, too?" she asked.

He nodded. "Been thinking about him ever since, more or less," he said. "And I'm sure you were right this morning, old girl, dead right. We ought to have him back."

Brenda showed no signs of being elated by her victory. "You mean that *I* convinced you—almost against your better judgment?" she asked uneasily.

"I suppose so," he admitted. "You—you wouldn't call me pig-headed about that sort of thing, would you?" And then as she made no answer, he added: "I believe I *can* be convinced by reason, B, right up to the hilt."

"It looks like it," she said seriously. "I ought not to have said what I did this morning. I—got excited. I do do silly things when I get excited." She rose from her chair, went over to the open window, and continued from there: "Because, dear, I don't want to influence you unduly; truly, I don't. I'm quite willing to give way about this. I'd so much sooner you did exactly as you feel about it."

"But one of us has got to give way," he said. "You believe it's the right thing to do to have Mattocks here again——"

"And you don't?" she asked quickly.

"I do," he affirmed.

"Ah, yes! you think it's right," Brenda said. "But do you feel it? Have you got any sort of conviction about it, apart from my—my unfortunately reasonable arguments?"

"I'm hanged if I know," he admitted. "You

see, old girl, it's like this: Honestly, I funk it. This afternoon Mrs. Upchurch's manner struck me as being different. She was, as you say, rather on her dignity. Never been like that with me before. Woman I've known all my life. And then, Hull! We left Mattocks's letter under the elm this morning, and Hull had picked it up. He gave it to me, just now, with rather a queer look in his face. Said he thought he'd better give it to me himself, as if . . . I suppose he had read it."

"Probably tried to, anyway," Brenda put in, with rather a grim smile.

"Well, you see how it is, don't you, old girl?" Tristram concluded. "It's pretty plain, I mean, how they'll all take it, if Mattocks comes back. We shall be up against it, up against the whole village."

"It will be a new experience for *you*," Brenda commented thoughtfully.

Tristram took a moment to rise to that. "Won't it be for you, too?" he asked.

She turned away from the window and came over and stood in front of him, her hands clasped behind her back. "Don't you realise, my dear," she said, "that all the people in the village have regarded me with the greatest suspicion and distaste for the last six years? It began in the second year of the war, while you were away. I said all the wrong things, you know. I wasn't, for instance, nearly as nasty as they thought I ought to have been about the Germans.

"But apart from all that, Tristram, they don't

like me, any of them, and they never will. I'm not their sort. They'd think more of me if I patronised them, played the grand lady and so on. They're used to that, and they can understand it. I've been too honest, too frank, and my ways of life and thought are detestable to them. They are new, strange, foreign. There isn't a grown person in Zeal-Afford, from the Orpins downwards, who wouldn't be glad to see me humiliated in some way, just to prove that they had been right.

"Well, as you say, if Abby comes back, it will bring things to a head; and the question is not are you prepared to face it—I know you are—but do you want to?" She slipped down to her knees and gave him her hands, before she added: "My poor darling. I'm not at all sure that I'm worth it. I'm a queer creature; and not a very nice one, I'm afraid. Now, shall I go away and leave you to think? You told me this morning that you thought better when you weren't touching me."

"No, B, I don't want to think," Tristram said, drawing her closer to him. "I'm convinced altogether now of one thing, and that is, that I'm on your side. Perhaps I don't understand you altogether, but I want to. And—it has been coming to me, darling, while you were talking—I rather feel, you know, that although you have never reasoned with me before, you have been influencing me—most tremendously—just by being there always, and always being yourself."

"It almost seems," Brenda said softly, "as if one has to be a propagandist."

"Well, if you believe in a thing, my dear little girl, surely you ought to preach it," he returned.

"And suppose," she suggested, "that you believe in not preaching? How can you preach that?"

Tristram laughed. "That," he said, "is a bit too complicated for me. Anyway, I'd better send Mattocks a wire. I'll—I'll go down to the post office and send it myself."

Brenda stood up, and resting her hands on his shoulders, looked down into his eyes. "This is nothing less than a declaration of war," she said. "You realise that?"

He smiled up at her. "Yes. I've decided to fight," he said. "And I believe in preaching."

"You're going to preach, as well as fight?" she asked.

"I am," he affirmed. "And this is my programme. This evening I publish my ultimatum by wiring to Abby—I shall have to call him Abby. The news of that will be all over the village to-night. To-morrow being Sunday, we take no active steps—but, naturally, absent ourselves from church. And on Monday morning, I begin the offensive by calling on the Orpins."

"You think the principle is worth it?" Brenda asked.

"I think *you* are," he said. "You see, darling, they may really believe you've gone wrong with Mattocks."

"Oh! they do," Brenda replied. "There's no sort of doubt about that."

III

THE INCOMPATIBLES

I

TRISTRAM spent a thoughtful Sunday.

His suggestion that no one need go to church that morning was well received in the nursery. Elise and Mary were frankly delighted and Miss Ingleby hardly less so. "I sometimes wonder, Mr. Wing, why we go at all?" she said, and gave the slight cock of the head that with her signified a spasm of nervous audacity. She so poignantly desired to be bold.

"Don't think Mr. Orpin does us much good, eh?" Tristram inquired.

"Father, how *could* he?" asked Elise, who, with her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands, was giving the subject her ardent attention. Mary, who would not be five for another four months yet, was apparently absorbed by her own dreams.

"Particularly *now*," Miss Ingleby added, with an effort of saying something important to Tristram that the children would not be able to understand.

Elise rose to that instantly. "Why not *now*, Miss Ingleby?" she asked eagerly.

"I don't know that you'd quite understand that yet, darling," she said.

"I shall ask mummy, then," Elise replied. "Unless you'll tell us, father?" she concluded hopefully.

"Does mummy tell you everything you ask her?" he said.

"She always tries to," Elise boasted, quite aware of her mother's unusual quality. "Course, there's some things I *can't* understand till I'm a bit older, things like 'lectricity and there not being really any up and down; but this isn't one of those sort, is it?"

"I'm not at all sure whether it is or not," Tristram said, with a whimsical smile, thinking of Elise's second instance. "Everything comes back to relativity in some kind of way."

Elise screwed up her face. "Things like Mr. Orpin's nose?" she asked, and then: "Does mine do it?"

Her father shook his head. "No, I'm glad you haven't got a nose like Mr. Orpin, Elise," he said.

"Why?" she asked, opening her eyes very wide.

"It wouldn't look pretty on you," he told her.

"That wasn't what you meant, father," she protested; "'cos I just know it wasn't. Father, has Mr. Orpin done something horrid?"

Tristram shook his head. "I'm not going to answer any more questions," he continued. "You'd better talk to mummy."

"She tells us *everything*," Elise boasted for the second time.

"I can, too!" Mary suddenly put in, with an

apparent irrelevance. "I know—I know lots things mummy don't."

"You *don't*, silly," Elise reproved her.

"Do! Do! Do!" Mary affirmed. "Know where you hid your 'pade in garden, yestiddy."

The otherwise frank Elise had a queer mania for hiding personal property, her own or her mother's.

"Now, children. That will do," Miss Ingleby put in, as the quarrel showed signs of becoming embittered. "Elise! I said that would do! Please, darling." And then to Tristram: "They're so extraordinarily different, aren't they? It's always a puzzle to me how different they are."

Tristram came away from the nursery with new material for thought. He had always left the broad lines of his two little daughters' education to their mother; and had, so far, been quite content with the result.

Miss Ingleby was a comparatively recent addition to the household, one of those hero-worshipping women who are apt to be fanatic in their adoption of a new gospel. And, in two months, Brenda had become a creed to her. There could be no question as to which side she would champion in the coming struggle. Her "particularly *now*," showed, also, that she was already prepared, eager to take up arms, even against the established church whose doctrines she had hitherto conventionally approved. She had contracted the dangerous fever of conversion rather late in life. Forty-one is a difficult age for a patient of this kind. Moreover, she had

passed through no introductory stage of earnest investigation. She had worshipped Brenda at first sight, and had adopted her as the new idol without a moment's hesitation.

But it was of the children rather than of Miss Ingleby that Tristram was thinking, of their innate differences and their peculiarities. Elise appeared to be her mother's willing disciple, but with that curious reaction, possibly a sort of compensation, exhibited in her mania for hiding personal property. She had been lightly punished for it on two or three occasions, when she had, for instance, hidden the key of her parents' bedroom under her own pillow. Brenda hid nothing.

Mary, on the other hand, was continually on the defensive. She seemed to prefer any authority to that of her mother, and had defiantly quoted the lodge-keeper's wife against Elise in a dispute as to the origin of babies. In fifteen years' time, Mary might be fighting on the other side.

Was it possible, Tristram wondered, that these differences of opinion with regard to Brenda's attitude towards life, were not solely due to the lack of education and experience, but were in some inexplicable manner, partly at least, inborn?

2

He did not, however, allow that speculation to influence him when he went into action next day. He was prepared to be patient and very calm, but

while he fought under Brenda's flag there could be no least suspicion of compromise.

He caught Orpin at ten o'clock before he went out into the parish, and was received in the vicar's study with a solemn and somewhat portentous scrutiny that still further gathered intensity when Tristram asked that Mrs. Orpin might be included in the interview.

"I don't know, I'm sure, if she's disengaged at the moment. I'll see," the vicar said, hesitated, and then left the room with an air of doing something uncommonly drastic, which, whatever it was, could hardly have been the persuasion of his wife who, judging by the rapidity of her appearance, must have been willing to come and easy to find.

And it was she who opened the conference, before her husband had had time to close the door behind them, by saying brightly: "Oh! good-morning, Mr. Wing. We didn't see any of you in church yesterday. I hope no one is ill at the Hall?"

"No, thanks. There's no one ill," Tristram said.

"But, of course, you have your wife's father and mother staying with you," Mrs. Orpin ran on cheerfully. "And I dare say you found a great deal to talk about yesterday."

Tristram nodded, feeling strangely inept. He had just discovered that it was very difficult to start a fight with an apparently friendly enemy, on their own ground at ten o'clock in the morning.

"Are they staying long?" Mrs. Orpin inquired.

"No. They are going away this afternoon. Paying another visit. They may come back later,"

Tristram explained ; and added, ineptly, and, as he was aware, with an effect of false relevance : “ Our friend, Mr. Mattocks, returns this afternoon.”

The vicar leaned suddenly back in his chair and put up his hands with a gesture of repugnance. His wife looked down at her lap, her little, hard mouth pursed and critical. Both attitudes were quite well done, but Tristram knew that he had told them nothing they did not already know.

It was the vicar who first replied in words. “ My dear Wing ; my dear Wing,” he said in a voice that hovered between disapproval and pleading, “ is that wise ? I cannot think that that’s wise.”

“ For long ? ” Mrs. Orpin inquired, still hiding the expression of her young, brown eyes from Tristram.

“ For as long as he cares to stay,” he said ; “ and as to its being wise——” He had his text now, but he was not allowed to begin his sermon. The vicar had got out of his chair and leaning over the back of it, said firmly :

“ I must beg of you, Wing, not to let this happen ! I really must beg you ; not for our sakes, but for the sake of the parish, which you must remember belongs to you in the worldly sense. They, the village people, feel, so I’m told, very strongly about it. Ah ! rumours of their very strong and freely expressed opinion have reached us. It is regrettable, intensely regrettable, but I’m afraid true, nevertheless, that Mrs. Wing is not—ah !—altogether popular in the parish. And in the circumstances——”

In the pause afforded by the vicar's anxiety not to repeat himself too exactly, his wife put in,—

“And do you, yourself, entirely approve of this man's coming back, Mr. Wing.” She raised her eyes as she spoke, and they were the inquisitive eyes of a shocked but keenly interested young woman, though her mouth was still pinched into that shrewd, disgusted button.

Tristram wished that his approval were, indeed, a little more whole-hearted as he replied, with as great an effect of assurance as he could: “Of course I do, Mrs. Orpin. Is there any reason why I shouldn't?”

Mrs. Orpin very faintly blushed. “I should have thought——” she began, but left her sentence incomplete, and again veiled her too eager eyes.

The vicar impatiently reseated himself. “I can *not* understand,” he began.

“That's my whole point,” Tristram put in quickly, reacting instinctively to his own phrase. “That's what I complain of, Orpin. You *don't* understand, and you give me no chance to enlighten you. I'm sorry, but you make me feel as if you really don't *want* to understand.”

“You forget that it's not my husband and myself, Mr. Wing,” Mrs. Orpin returned sharply. “What you have to consider, and what *we* have to consider, too, is the opinion of the village.” Even her eyes were hard and bold now; the eyes of the vicar's wife accused of not wanting to understand.

“Exactly. Exactly,” the vicar approved. “As

I said." He had resumed his questing scrutiny, his head bent ; peering between his eyebrows and the upper rims of his glasses.

Tristram shrugged his shoulders. " Hang the village—for the moment," he said. " What I want you, what I want everybody, to understand is this : My wife's feeling for our friend Mattocks is purely one of sympathy. She wants to help him. I could no more be jealous of him than I could be jealous of—of you, Orpin. Well, I believe that just now my wife *can* help him, to pull himself together. She had a letter from him on Saturday which she read to me. Rather a pathetic letter. And, in the circumstances, she and I agreed, absolutely, that the only thing to do was to let him come back to the cottage for a time. Now all that's clear enough, isn't it ? Here's a chap, in a poor way, tempted to drink, and so on, and we can put him on his legs. Then, surely, that's the right thing to do. But no ! just because the infernal villagers have got dirty, suspicious minds ; because they can't even conceive of decent, human, friendly relations between a—I must say it—a perfectly devoted wife and mother, and a poor little starved genius of a painter, we are to let the unfortunate devil go to the dogs. Well, all I can say is, Orpin, that if you think that's the sort of thing Christ would have done, you've got a very different opinion of Him from mine."

He paused there with a triumphant sense of having used an incontrovertible argument. He had still to learn, never having hitherto considered the

question, that Christianity has had to give way before theology.

The woman's more active mind was the first to respond with, "You seem to forget, Mr. Wing, that there are occasions when it is necessary that one man should suffer for the congregation."

Tristram would have liked time to consider that, and he was not at all sure of his ground as he replied, too curtly :

"I don't think this is one of them. The villagers are obviously in the wrong, and they must learn their lesson. And, by Gad, if Joe Popple comes before me on the bench, as he is pretty sure to do next month, I'll commit him to the Quarter Sessions."

"Not a very Christian spirit that, is it, Mr. Wing?" Mrs. Orpin asked.

The vicar gravely shook his head. "Ah! we must not be too ready, Wing," he said, "to quote the example of Christ for our own purposes only. If we worship Him in spirit and in truth, our way will be made plain to us."

Tristram braced himself against the uneasy feeling of defeat that was invading him. He realised that somehow, and theoretically rather than practically, the vicar had been right in his last statement ; but he was not less convinced that in this particular matter Christ would have been on his own side.

"I take that back about Joe Popple," he said. "I stand corrected in that. But, honestly, this sort of thing does make one feel rather vindictive. However, that doesn't affect the real issue one way

or the other. The point is that I don't see, and I don't believe you can either, Orpin, why a perfectly innocent man should have to suffer because the villagers have got such filthy minds."

"Well, really, Mr. Wing, I think you might make a little allowance for them—in the circumstances," Mrs. Orpin said, before he had time to continue. "After what you've said, my husband and I perhaps can understand Mrs. Wing's feeling towards Mr. Mattocks, however much appearances are against her. But you can't expect the villagers to think as we do, when they've seen her—at midnight, you know; and after having spent the best part of the evening alone with him in the cottage——"

Tristram turned to her, his face flushing angrily. "Do you believe that my wife is absolutely innocent, Mrs. Orpin, or do you not?" he demanded sharply.

Mrs. Orpin's expression was suddenly demure. "Of course. After what you've just told us, Mr. Wing," she said.

"Then isn't it your duty and your husband's to set the parish right about it?" Tristram asked. "Certainly one can't expect too much of these people here, but isn't it a part of your duty to instruct them?"

There was the faint suggestion of a smile on Mrs. Orpin's downcast face, but she made no attempt to reply.

"Ah! that's an extremely difficult duty, Wing," the vicar said, momentarily ceasing to peer. "You

must know yourself, how difficult it is to guide these people."

"Have you tried?" Tristram asked—"in this particular matter, I mean?"

"Well, of *course* we have, Mr. Wing," Mrs. Orpin said, still a trifle demure. "I've already told several of the women that they've no right to say anything against Mrs. Wing; and that I can't possibly listen to them."

Tristram guessed that that statement was literally true; he guessed also that the manner of Mrs. Orpin's refusal to listen to scandal had merely confirmed the gossips in their opinion.

"You understand, Wing," the vicar began, but Tristram interrupted him.

"I don't. I don't understand, Orpin," he said. "I don't understand your attitude, or your wife's. I've no doubt whatever that she has refused, in a way, to listen to village gossips, the cottagers at all events. But I'm not satisfied that either of you are willing to—to take up arms, as it were, and reprove the villagers, including, for instance, Miss Latimer and Mrs. Priestly—to stand, in fact, for decency and clean-thinking." He paused, noting that the vicar's nose had begun to twitch, and got to his feet. "Oh! think it over, for goodness' sake, think it over," he added impatiently. "I—I don't want to quarrel with either of you, upon my word I don't, but you're making it very difficult for me. You see, I'm determined to see this thing through. It's partly for that reason that I'm having Mattocks back. I mean to fight all this

—this prurience, for the sake of the principle involved. Well, surely it's a principle that appeals to you, the principle of clean-thinking? Can't you come in on my side? Isn't it your duty to come in; as the Vicar of the Parish?"

There was a moment's pause before Orpin, now meditatively regarding his finger-nails, said: "We could have helped you so much better if Mr. Mattocks were not here. The very fact of his presence will—ah! keep the flame alight. If——"

"You miss my whole point, Orpin," Tristram interposed. "I don't mean to let the fire smoulder out. I mean to stamp on it."

"Adding fresh fuel at the same time?" Mrs. Orpin put in bitterly. She had been deeply offended by his reference to Miss Latimer and Mrs. Priestley; as deeply offended as only a woman can be when she is directly accused of a misdemeanour that she has actually committed.

Tristram shook off the entanglement of the metaphor with a gesture of contempt. "There's the plain issue for you," he said. "Are you on the side of clean-thinking or the other?"

"We are most certainly on the side of common decency—and prudence," Mrs. Orpin returned boldly.

"Precisely; precisely," muttered the vicar.

3

Tristram returned home to find Brenda with a telegram in her hand.

"Naturally he has chosen a perfectly impossible train," she said, by way of greeting. "This was sent from Swindon; and he'll arrive at Exeter soon after twelve, to find that there's no possible connection until three. More likely still, he'll go on to Plymouth, expecting to get out at Newton Abbott. He always takes it for granted that a train will put him down at the place he wants to go to. He never asks. So I'm afraid, dear old boy, that we'll have to take the car over to Exeter and find him there. We've got an hour and a half. Will you come? Or shall I take Palmer?"

Tristram sighed, and held out his hand for the telegram. "Left Paddington eight thirty hooray Abby," was all the information he received from that, but Brenda had already drawn the necessary inferences for him.

"Oh! I'll go," he said. "We'll both go. I've seen the Orpins. I'll tell you on the way."

"You don't look altogether as if you'd scored a signal victory," she commented gently.

"But neither did I suffer defeat," he returned, with a smile. "However—we've none too much time."

He had come away from the vicarage with a feeling of weary impatience, and the small vexations inseparable from the proximity of Abby had, it

seemed, already begun. But it was impossible to be disheartened in Brenda's presence ; and it was with this tribute that he opened when they were clear of the village.

"I'm fit again now," he said. "You always make me feel as if I were good for anything, old girl. But, by Gad, you know, in Orpin's study I feel as if nothing were worth while. There's something so infernally stagnant about it."

"Stagnant ! Yes." She approved his word softly. "The Orpins are the kind that don't change. And I suppose you haven't exactly converted them."

"Anyway, I left them with something to think about," he returned, and gave her a fairly comprehensive account of the interview. "I ended with that," he concluded. "I begged them to think it over—earnestly, you know. Why are you smiling, B ? "

She was looking up at him, smiling with her eyes rather than with her lips, tenderly yet with a touch of raillery.

"My dear love," she answered him ; "don't you know what the Orpins' thinking will be like ? Not the least like your own serious, mathematical endeavour to state a problem, that you didn't know you'd been living with for ten years. All their real thinking will be devoted to defending their own point of view, and they'll go on until they have quite convinced themselves that they have been utterly and irreproachably right in all they have thought and said and done. You've

stirred up a little sediment, you see ; made them, perhaps, feel rather dirty for the moment. But, give them time, not much time, and the sediment will soon settle again ; and—if I may put it like that—all the top water of their minds, which is all that they are aware of, will be as limpid and as clear as ever.”

“ Good Lord ! ” Tristram murmured.

“ Yes, I know,” Brenda agreed.

“ But look here, B,” he protested. “ Suppose you’re right. Do you mean one can’t *do* anything ; can’t make ’em see things in some sort of proportion ? ”

“ Not unless they honestly want to, themselves,” she said. “ And the Orpins don’t. Why should they ? They’re perfectly satisfied with themselves ; and, honestly, Tristram, I don’t think we’ve the least right to try and alter them just because we happen to think differently.”

Tristram was so absorbed by her argument that he nearly ran down a hen which insisted at all hazards on returning to its own side of the road.

“ And in any case, you can’t alter them,” she continued, “ any more than you could persuade that hen to stay on the other side of the road until we had passed. The Orpins, too, have got their own notion of what is safe for them ; and nothing you can threaten them with, no, not even the juggernaut, will stop them making a bolt for what they believe to be the safety of their own familiar home, which is their familiar way of thinking, in this instance. I’ve no doubt that at this very

moment, my dear, Mrs. Orpin is deeply engaged in clearing her own character by blackening mine. When she has finally convinced herself, as she will, that I'm a shameless and indecent woman, she'll be happy again—and then she'll go and tell Mrs. Priestley what a poor credulous deceived man their squire is."

"But, B, this is all new, isn't it?" Tristram asked.

"As new as the stone age," she said brightly.

"No, but I mean, the Orpins never used to have a down on you?"

"They've been working up to it for eight years."

"Well, I've never noticed it."

"My dear," Brenda said. "You've never noticed anything of that sort. You've hardly noticed me, not in that way. You've just taken me for granted. Even Elise is more aware of my difference than you've been."

"Yes, I suppose that's true," he admitted. "I've never criticised you."

"And now?" she asked.

"Now, less than ever," he asserted. "One doesn't criticise one's general."

"Never?" she submitted; and when he had acknowledged that he had known instances, she added: "Besides, I'm not your general. This is your campaign, not mine. I'm only a——"

"A banner?" he suggested.

"Heavens!" she exclaimed. "A banner! A slogan. A text. An example. The rôle I've always

tried to avoid. Oh! Tristram, darling, why ever did you begin to think?"

"I was forced to," he said quietly.

"After eight years of me?"

"The only remarkable thing is that it didn't come before."

"Even now, if it hadn't been for Abby——" she began reflectively.

Tristram did not answer that in words. They had come into the town of Exeter, and intimate conversation was no longer easy.

But although all the surface of his attention was fully occupied by driving the car and in keeping an eye open to the salutes of the many people who knew him by sight, some part of his mind was busy with the thought that Brenda and himself, possibly also the Orpins, might have been happier at this moment if it hadn't been for Abby.

They found him without difficulty. He was standing at the corridor window, abstractedly gazing out at the crowd on the platform. He had had, apparently, no sort of intention of leaving the train, which went on from there to Plymouth without a stop.

His face lighted up with a sudden glow of happiness as he caught sight of Brenda. "Oh! but I say, how splendid of you to meet me here!" he said. "Do I get out?"

Tristram noticed that Brenda's answering smile had a quality that was almost strange to him. Her expression was motherly, protective, and yet he

had never seen quite that look in her face when she was with their own children.

He braced himself to the task of giving Abby a cordial welcome, which included what was to Tristram the always slightly repellent task of shaking hands with him. Abby's slender, cool hand always lay so quiescently, so bonelessly, in his own square grip. It was, Tristram felt, less like a living hand than some limp, casual object that he grasped with a start of disgusted surprise. Also, Abby's hands were never really clean, even apart from the mahogany stain of cigarette smoke which disfigured them.

And yet what wonderful hands they were! As Brenda had said, it was almost impossible to conceive of Abby breaking anything. He had such an intense feeling for the material of anything he touched; he never forced a reluctant object, he manipulated it, coaxed it. The finest glass, the most delicate thread, was always safe with him. He appreciated the quality, seemed, magically, to have a sense of the last possibilities, of everything he took between those slim, discoloured fingers. Yet Tristram waiting for his own turn, shuddered as he saw them folded about the little white hand of Brenda. For himself, Abby would have no response; but for her there would be, he could see it, a clinging, half-fondling embrace.

The man was a genius, without doubt, but Tristram was not sure that he liked geniuses—while they were still alive. Hitherto, he had shrugged his shoulders over the whole affair. The man had

been another of Brenda's lame ducks, nothing more. Even the report of that kiss on the drive had hardly moved him. Now, he shuddered at the thought of it. This, it seemed, was another of the penalties imposed on those who begin to think.

"Looking pretty fit—for you," he said as heartily as he could, carefully pressing Abby's limp hand. "Is that all the luggage you've got; or is there another bag in the van?"

"No, no. That's all," Abby stammered, between surprise and apology, and then, looking up with a quick flash of defiance, he added, "I haven't got such a devil of a lot of clothes, you know."

"Oh! quite. That's all right; come along," Tristram said, still seeking the proper note of heartiness. "We've got the car outside. B. told you that this train doesn't stop at Newton?"

What a wisp of a man the fellow looked, he thought; not much shorter than himself, but so meagre with his narrow shoulders, his hollow cheeks and his general effect of being held together by bits of string—body and clothes, too. And even in that hot sunlight on the open platform, he appeared pinched and cold.

"Yes, I'm no good at trains," Abby admitted, and turned to Brenda with evident relief as he continued, "Though I did have a sort of doubt about it. That was why I sent you the telegram from Swindon."

"You might have asked the guard or some one," she suggested, as they turned to leave the station. "Cheaper than sending a wire, wouldn't it?"

Abby made a graceful explanatory gesture with his now frankly dirty hand. "And then what should I have done when they told me, for instance, that the train didn't stop and I'd have hours, perhaps, to wait somewhere? Besides, these chaps always shout at me as if I were deaf, or a bit wrong in the head. God alone knows why."

"Just to make sure of holding your attention, I expect," Brenda explained tactfully. "You always look as if you were thinking of something else all the time one's talking to you."

"Oh! Very likely," Abby agreed, as if he were glad to find so reasonable an explanation. "I hadn't thought of that."

Tristram, thinking of the telegram, decided that, after all, the fellow had managed the affair very cleverly. He had made sure, with the least possible trouble to himself, of everything being made easy for him. He had obviously taken care to exhibit himself at the carriage window when the train stopped at Exeter, for instance. He wasn't such a fool as he chose, for some reason of his own, to appear.

"I think we'd better tuck you in behind," he said to Abby, when they reached the car. "We've one or two things to get in the town, and it'll be easier for B. to get in and out. More comfortable for you, too."

Abby's only reply was to turn to Brenda, with a patient, wistful expression that was something between the beseeching question of one who speaks another language and the pathetic stare of a monkey.

She was his interpreter, and from her he took all his commands.

"Yes, you'll be better in there," Brenda said; "and to be quite honest, Abby, there are other reasons why it would be as well for me to sit in front with Tristram, going home. It's by way of being a demonstration. But we'll explain all that to you, later. Get in and cover yourself up. It seems impossible that you can be cold on a day like this, but you look it."

Tristram was relieved to find Brenda so clearly on his own side in this. If she had boldly seated herself in the back of the car he would not have raised any protest. He had determined to scorn village opinion, and he had no intention of altering his policy, but he felt a curious creeping of the skin at the thought of Brenda being tucked in there with Abby. He might have wanted to hold her hand. Did she ever allow him to hold her hand? He must get her to tell him exactly how Abby behaved when he was alone with her.

They met one of the Cathedral clergy while they were in Exeter. Brenda had gone into a draper's, and Tristram was just wondering if he ought to try and make conversation with Abby, when he was hailed by Canon Lazenby, and turned to speak to him with a distinct feeling of relief. He did not attempt to introduce him to Abby, but he saw the canon look once or twice at the back of the car, with a hint of perplexed inquiry. And then, almost before the old man was out of hearing, Abby leaned forward and said confidentially,—

"I say, Wing, don't those fat priests make you fairly sick with disgust?"

Tristram was caught off his guard. "Good God, no," he said curtly. "Known Lazenby all my life. Thundering good sort. One of the best." In his mind he was comparing the pink and white cleanliness, the almost ostentatious neatness of Canon Lazenby with Abby's slovenly, rather unsavoury general appearance. The fellow might be clean underneath, but, by Heaven, he did not look it.

Abby made no reply, but wilted back under the cover of his rug. His expression had in it something of the same bewilderment as that so recently exhibited by the canon.

Brenda, emerging a moment later from the draper's, glanced first at Abby and then with a touch of anxiety at Tristram still sitting rather stiffly over his steering-wheel.

"Have you two been quarrelling already?" she asked cheerfully.

"No, no. Rather not," Tristram said, making an effort to recover some effect of geniality. "A slight difference of opinion with regard to Lazenby, that's all. He stopped and spoke to me for a minute while you were in Hodgkinson's. I say, old girl, I suppose you realise that we shan't get lunch till past two, as it is? If you've any more shopping to do, you'd better cut it now, and come in again to-morrow."

Brenda nodded and climbed promptly into the car, but her parcel had not yet come out, and while

they waited for it, she looked back over her shoulder and said to Abby,—

“Canon Lazenby isn’t your sort, of course ; but he’s a perfect old dear, all the same. A great friend of ours.”

“Sorry,” Abby mumbled, and then partly emerging from under his rug, he added, with an effect of sudden discovery : “But I could draw him, you know, all fat and sleek, like a plump white slug. Can’t you see him without his clothes ? I can.”

“Abby ! Really you mustn’t !” Brenda remonstrated, but Tristram wished that there had been something more of reproof in her voice and manner, and found himself thinking with a sort of kindly reminiscence of the Orpins. There was, undoubtedly, something to be said for their point of view.

Abby had subsided again into the corner of the car. His mouth was slightly open, his eyes rapt. In his mind he was making a brilliant and most amusing cartoon of Canon Lazenby.

There was no conversation on the way home. Tristram seemed to be intent on creating a new record for the distance, and drove with a kind of vicious absorption. And Brenda looked a trifle *distracte* and uneasy ; almost, indeed, as if she were not quite sure of herself. More than once she made a movement as if she were about to speak, but either the speed of the car or Tristram’s resolute aloofness must have daunted her, for nothing came until they were slowing down for the lodge gates.

“Go straight on up to the house,” she said ;

then, with just the least suspicion of apology in her voice: "Abby will be having lunch with us. There's nothing for him at the cottage. We can send his things down later."

Tristram nodded without giving any sign either of resentment or approval.

Abby appeared to be still deeply engaged in the contemplation of some inner vision. Even when they had reached the house he stood absent-mindedly in the hall until Tristram came up to him and said firmly, but quite inoffensively:

"You'd better have a wash before lunch, hadn't you? One always gets so filthy travelling."

"Oh, yes. If you like," Abby returned, looking up at his host with the air of one who is anxious to conform as far as possible to the extraordinary customs of a foreign country.

4

Even in the company of those who were approximately of his own kind, Abby was a figure to be picked out of the crowd, to be observed and remembered by the average man as being, perhaps, "the queerest of a queer lot." Yet this distinction of his was not achieved by any gross peculiarity of manner or appearance. In company, he was for the most part quiet and silent, until moved by some impulse to express himself—at which times the idea, whatever it might be, was presented with the simple eagerness of a child who has made a

fascinating discovery. He saw so much more than the average man, so much more even than the average artist. When he had thrilled to the description of Canon Lazenby, it had come to him, without doubt, as an inspired piece of symbolism. In a flash he had seen the, to him, completely satisfying representation, the very flesh and spirit of what he was trying to express.

Nevertheless, despite his usual habit of silence, seen among a crowd of artists—the very queerest kind, sombreroed and long-haired—Abby drew the attention. He had a distinctive air, a distinctive manner of gesture. In a world of artificial speech and mechanical response, he had the fundamental simplicity of the untrained child, the natural animal. He had but one passion, to portray what he believed to be the truth. His truth, no doubt, was a species of caviare and would convey no message to, say, the Orpins. But to himself it was a message direct from God.

At tea in the Hall drawing-room with Brenda, Tristram, and the Fullertons, Abby's peculiarities were all too poignantly exposed. Mrs. Fullerton, who had never seen him before, was frankly intrigued.

"Paint? Don't you?" she asked sharply, looking up at him as he stood, almost pathetically separated from his company, abstractedly leaning against the mantelpiece.

"I try to," he said slowly, as if he were deliberately choosing words that she would be able to understand.

"Portraits?" Mrs. Fullerton inquired. "Or what?"

"It doesn't matter, you know," Abby explained politely, "*what* one paints more particularly. I'd just as soon paint a maggot as the portrait of a man or woman, if I felt that I could get the spirit of the maggot."

"Oh! Ah! yes. I know," Mrs. Fullerton said. "Like all those new people. I forget the names of half of them. Post-impressionists, there were, and Futurists, and Vorticists, wasn't it? All so fond of painting queer things. So you belong to that lot, do you? I'd thought from what Brenda told me that you were a real artist, you know."

Abby's eyes turned wistfully to Brenda, seeking help, with the forlorn perplexity of a troubled monkey.

"Abby doesn't belong to any of those schools, mother," Brenda explained. "His method is entirely his own. And you never have the least difficulty in knowing what his pictures are meant for. Abby, I assure you, can draw."

"It's a bit of a snare, of course, sometimes," Abby put in, having something to say on this subject and forgetting the limitations of his audience. "So beastly tempting just to copy things when you feel lazy. I could draw you, for instance, just as you seem to look, so that the housemaid could recognise it; but it wouldn't be any more *you* than if it were a photograph."

Mrs. Fullerton appeared to be interested. "But if you were to paint my portrait now?" she suggested.

Abby shook his head. "Nothing there to paint, you see," he said.

Mrs. Fullerton stiffened slightly and Brenda intervened a little nervously by saying, "He won't paint me either, mother."

"But that's entirely different, of course," Abby replied eagerly. "You, at present," he continued, turning to Brenda, "are clean beyond me. When I first saw you, I wanted to paint you naked on a mountain stretching out your arms to the sun, but that's too damned literary altogether; it's just picking out the obvious allegory and making a story of it. Just drawing, as a matter of fact. The truth is that I simply can't see you except in those obvious ways; the naked mother, and so on. Can't get far enough off, you know. . . ."

He had, apparently, still more to say on this fascinating subject, but Tristram, who had been quietly watching him, interrupted at this point by saying to his mother-in-law:

"The car is going to take you over to the Nielsens', mater; but you won't mind if Palmer drives you? I'd meant to take you myself, but it would mean that I should be a bit late getting back. Are all your things ready? You ought to start in a few minutes if you want to have plenty of time to dress for dinner. It's only between twenty and thirty miles, but not a very good road."

Brenda accepted her cue with the promptitude of a young actress, sure, upon this occasion, of what she had to do in a new and rather difficult part. The great thing just now was to pack off her father

and mother, and send Abby down to the cottage. After that, she would have to talk to this strange, new man who had been her husband for eight years, and try to discover what, in the very imminent future, she ought to do. It was certainly a new part for her. Tristram's sudden attack of thinking seemed to be infectious.

The first duty was accomplished without difficulty; but after the Fullertons had gone, she would have preferred to manage the second without Tristram's co-operation—an impossibility as it seemed, in view of the fact that he was, almost ostentatiously, devoting himself to her company. And together they went back silently into the drawing-room, where Abby, relieved of constraint, was stretched on a chesterfield smoking one of his endless chain of cigarettes.

"Now, we'd better get you installed," she said to him with something less than her usual certainty of manner. "Your bag has gone already."

"Oh! Yes!" Abby replied, making the two words convey at once his surprise and disappointment. "Are you coming up with me?"

"Rather. We'll both come," Tristram said. "Jolly evening."

"Oh, yes, rather," Abby echoed absently—with his air of being lost again among the Philistines.

"You see, Abby, we haven't told you yet," Brenda explained, "that there's been a scandal in Zeal-Afford. We—we were seen the night before you went away; and the vicar has been quite nasty about it; and, well, we've let you come back,

you see, but it will be better for the sake of the parish if we are all seen about together."

"But, good God, what difference does it make to *you* what the vicar or any one says?" Abby returned. "You don't care, do you?"

Tristram had felt that, too; but Abby's statement had an absolute quality that his own had somehow lacked; and he resented the deduction that he had been outdone in loyalty and simple confidence.

"In a way, no, my dear fellow," he said. "We neither of us care a rap. In fact we're rather snapping our fingers at the whole crowd by having you back here. All the same, it will be just as well to—er—go carefully."

"Oh! I understand. All right," Abby agreed, as if he had, indeed, understood much more than Tristram had intended to convey. "Well, look here, Hildegarde; why bother to come up now? I shall be all right."

Hildegarde was his name for Brenda, and he was sparing in his use of it. He had told her once that he had no idea what it meant, but that it gave him a "nice, comforted feeling."

"Oh! we'll walk up with you," Tristram said.

"The Cottage," built twenty years earlier for a Wing pensioner, who had once been Tristram's governess, lay above the Hall, faced south, and commanded a view across the full width of the valley. Downstairs the accommodation was mainly sitting-room, which was almost spacious, brilliantly lighted, and designed to catch the sunlight for

twelve hours out of the twenty-four. Behind, were the neat little kitchen, scullery, and larder, a perfect little set of workshops in which to conduct the necessary business of cooking and cleaning. Above were two bedrooms, one to match the perfection of the sitting-room; the other on a more modest scale, facing north, and used by Abby as a studio; and, finally, a beautifully fitted little bathroom.

Madame Passard, its first inhabitant, had boasted that her cottage was as near perfection as was possible in England. She had collaborated in its design, and her influence had been responsible for the addition of outside shutters to all the windows, and a general effect of being slightly exotic. It was, indeed, as she had said, a cottage to live and die in; although she had not, herself, fulfilled the latter ambition, having returned to her native country, as a duty, in 1914, and died there three years later.

Brenda had often said that she would like to live in the cottage herself, and it was certainly an ideal place for Abby, all of whose more domestic needs were attended to by the wife of the undergardener, who lived less than a hundred yards away to the northward.

"Everything is just as you left it," Brenda said to Abby, as she and Tristram lingered for a moment in the sunlit sitting-room. "Tidied a little, perhaps; and I've sent up some more books for you."

"Thanks frightfully. It's all splendid," Abby replied mechanically.

"And Mrs. Harrison will give you your dinner to-night," Brenda continued.

"Oh, yes. Frightfully good of you," Abby said. "And I suppose I shall see you sometime to-morrow?"

"Probably," Brenda returned, without any great effect of assurance. "Well, you'll be all right now. Good-night."

Tristram gave Abby quite a friendly nod, as he also said good-night. He was a little sorry for him just then. It was so evident that all the attractions of Madame Passard's unique cottage meant nothing to Abby. All that he had sought by his return to Zeal-Afford was Brenda's company and encouragement; and it seemed possible that he would not, now, receive either in very full measure. And, although Tristram was greatly relieved by her new attitude—he had noticed that Abby had been ready to shake hands with her and that she had cleverly avoided giving him the opportunity—he was dimly aware that there was something lacking. Precisely what, he was to learn on his way home.

"I'm afraid it's going to be rather difficult," Brenda began almost at once, and without turning to wave a last farewell to the figure of Abby, standing forlornly at one of the sitting-room windows to watch her out of sight.

"Yes," Tristram agreed thoughtfully, and added: "Whose fault is that?"

"Yours—and his," she said.

"And the Orpins?" he suggested.

"Indirectly only. Though they began it, I suppose, so far as you are concerned."

"But look here, B," Tristram argued. "It's only that I've begun to notice things a bit more."

"Certain things," she corrected him. "What has happened to you seems to be pretty much what happened to Adam and Eve. You've been eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, my dear boy. Very interesting for you, no doubt, but at the same time, as I warned you, apt to lead to all kinds of distressing consequences—chief among them, the looking for evil where none exists."

"You're classing me now with the Orpins and the village generally!" he protested.

She flung out her hands with a sudden gesture of despair. "I don't know about that," she said. "What I do know, what I've been intensely conscious of ever since Abby arrived, is that you're forcing me to be unnatural. All the spontaneity has gone—all the spirit. Five days ago I could spend myself in trying to help Abby, without an afterthought. There were no side-issues. It was all splendid, fine, clean, and indubitably Right. Now there is an immense, an overwhelming side-issue, and that is You."

"I didn't count before?" Tristram put in.

"Not in that connection," she said. "You didn't notice or if you did you forgot about it next minute. My relations with Abby didn't affect my relations with you, until you began to think about them. It wasn't only that you trusted me

absolutely ; no doubt you do still ; it was that you didn't in any way criticise me."

" I don't now," he said.

" You do ! " she affirmed. " You've wondered to-day how I can shake hands with Abby without shuddering. How I could ever possibly have let him kiss me ? That's criticism of *me*. It's contrasting my feelings with your own, to my disadvantage. I am, by that much, less perfect than you used to think me. Can you deny that ? "

" I'd never thought of it as any sort of criticism of you," he defended himself. " As a matter of fact, I've been admiring you more than ever to-day——"

" For what ? " she asked quickly. " I'll tell you : for playing up to your prejudices, and not being myself. That isn't admiration of me as an individual, it's the pride and self-satisfaction you feel in owning me. You're warm and grateful to me because I have done the thing you wanted me to do without having had to ask me to do it. But I wasn't proud, Tristram. I felt mean—disloyal to myself. I was doing something not because I had the impulse to do it, but in order to please you."

" Well, that was a piece of pure unselfishness on your part," he replied. " Mayn't I admire you for that ? "

She stopped in her walk, and faced him. " Look here, my dear man," she said. " As you've begun to think, you may as well go on with it ; and I put it to you as a nice little problem to whet your mind on, that no one can define unselfishness. It

has been tried, but never with any great success. We've got a few rules for everyday use, and generally we assume that it is unselfish to do something some part of you doesn't like, for the sake of pleasing or doing good to some one else. Well, in that sense, perhaps, I was being unselfish to-day; but I've got little satisfaction from it, certainly not the satisfaction I got from helping Abby a few days ago."

"I don't quite follow that," Tristram began, but she did not allow him to continue.

"You never will, by thinking," she broke in; "it can only be understood by feeling. And you'll never understand until you've—you've *flamed*, as I did the other night. When that comes, you'll be beyond all questions of selfishness or unselfishness; you'll give yourself utterly without afterthought. You become more than an individual, you become a part of the great purpose, and you are free from any thought of reward or punishment, or of ethics of any sort. And that's the only sort of unselfishness that I can admit, because at those times you completely and finally forget yourself."

They had been standing still in the middle of the path, while Brenda delivered herself of this article of her creed, but when she had finished they began to walk slowly on, making now for the direction of the big sycamore. Neither of them spoke again until they had reached that favourite summer resort of theirs, and then Tristram reopened the conversation by saying,—

"Well, B, I've got a sort of feeling that you

are right about all that. In fact, when we were coming out of the cottage I was sorry for Abby, and I felt then as if something were missing, as if I had spoilt something. I see now what it was, although I can't put it into words exactly. But look here, old girl, what I don't understand is what we're going to do, what I'm going to do, more particularly? I'm willing enough to face it out with the Orpins and all the rest of 'em; but, it's a fault, no doubt, I don't believe I can stick your friendship with Abby."

"I was afraid you'd say that," Brenda said quietly. "Well? And why not?"

"I can't trust him to keep his thoughts off you," Tristram said.

"Nor I—now," she admitted simply.

"Now?"

"Oh! he's come back altered, after those few days," she said. "He has come back expecting more—more from me. He's ready now to make demands on my time. He's going to blackmail me with the threat of his own ruin. He considers that our answer to his letter has sealed a contract and that I'm definitely pledged, now, to save him from himself. Well, the point for us—you as well—is to consider how far our responsibility is going to take us? We've got beyond the opinion of the village now—this is almost cosmic."

"I don't see that any one can hold us responsible for Abby's well-being," Tristram said.

"No one except our two selves," Brenda replied.

"But do you really believe that he'd go to the devil if you—if you chucked him over?"

"He might—to spite us and himself. He's so big in some ways and in others just an obstinate, spoilt child. We've got to assume the possibility in any case."

Tristram's eyes were apparently following the movement of some insect in the grass, but he watched it with his eyes only, not with his mind. Brenda glanced at him, knew that he was concentrating his whole attention on this problem of Abby, and waited for him to speak. For once, she was glad to lean on his masculine logic.

"Look here, old girl," he began, with a touch of hesitation. "I'd like to get this thing stated in black and white, if you don't mind, without any half-shades, you know. They can come, later."

"Good!" she encouraged him. "Go ahead!"

"Let's assume," he said, "that Abby's future depends upon you; that if you don't give him all the encouragement he asks for, he'll go back to his drink and his drugs, either out of pique or in desperation, and go to the devil."

"We can assume that," Brenda agreed.

"Very well, then," Tristram continued, "now, let's go on a step and assume further that you, with my consent, take on the full responsibility for his salvation; that we agree, for example, that it's up to us to save his genius for the world. In that case, are we going to fix any limit to our sacrifice? Suppose, for instance, that you found it was

necessary to go away and live with him as his mistress, would you go ? ”

Brenda, with her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands, was staring straight out ahead of her. She had anticipated his conclusion long before he reached it, but she had wanted to hear the thing said aloud. She waited a few seconds before she replied :

“ And suppose we make the assumption that that is definitely beyond the limit of our possible sacrifice ? ”

“ As you agree that it is ? ” he urged her.

“ Isn’t that a side-issue ? ” she asked. “ A half-tone ? So far as your problem is concerned, it is sufficient to state a case and say that we could not go so far as that. What then ? ”

“ Just this,” he concluded, “ if you can stop at one point, you can stop at another. Or would you say that there is a hard and fast line, a definable limit beyond which we can’t go ? If so, is that line fixed at precisely the same point for both of us ? I, for example, might draw it at kisses, and you a little farther on—— ”

“ Oh ! quite ! ” she interrupted him. “ It’s all so desperately clear and logical, isn’t it ? And the next assumption, and one so easy to make, is that Abby, despite his natural gift in that direction, will draw no lines at all ; that he will inevitably go on demanding steadily more and more, and that if one is going to stop anywhere one may just as well stop now as at any other point. As an argument, my dear, I can find no flaw in it. Once you

admit that limitation, it's just a question of mathematics."

"But we must admit it, surely?" Tristram pleaded.

"Yes, because we have all—except Abby—eaten of the fruit of Knowledge," she said. "We have split the absolute into two halves, good and evil; and instead of trying to join them up again we have expended all our energies in seeking the origin of evil as if it were a separate thing from the origin of good."

"That's a bit too metaphysical for me," Tristram murmured.

"It isn't metaphysical at all!" Brenda said. "All your old metaphysics are concerned with splitting things into smaller and smaller pieces. And surely, my dear boy, *you* ought to be able to realise what I mean? Haven't you just been through it all yourself? Haven't you just begun to test everything by your intelligence, and haven't you found that your intelligence has split and soiled everything you've touched with it?"

"In a way, yes, B," he admitted. "But what else can one do? Have you got any remedy?"

"None!" she said. "There isn't one. At least——"

"At least——?" he suggested.

She leaned towards him and looked into his eyes. "It's only a poor little feminine suggestion," she said. "But it has just occurred to me that if we could all take it for granted that we are, every one of us, poor, incomplete, struggling, half-blind,

feeble creatures, and that none of us knows much, if any, better than the next one ; and if we could get out of the habit of always assuming that our own ways of thinking must necessarily be right, or at least a little better than our neighbours' ways ; that then we might, just possibly, be able, in time, to *find* a remedy."

She was still looking into his eyes, and she found there a readiness to respond that suddenly startled her. " Only, darling," she concluded, " you mustn't believe that because I've said it. You must come to it yourself ; and not by thought but by feeling."

" By God, B, you're very wonderful," Tristram said.

" So wonderful," she replied with a smile, " that I have been unable to advance our plan of action a single step. What do you propose to *do* now, my dear boy, with regard to Abby ? "

" What do you ? " he returned.

" Nothing," she said.

" Go on, just as we have been—— ? "

" And await the crisis," she said. " You see our beautiful argument omitted to take any account of the fact that we can never foresee the future."

" But we have to act as though we could," he submitted.

" Not always," she said, concluding inconsequently, after a short pause, " And this is one of them."

IV

INSET

I

MRS. PRIESTLEY and Miss Latimer were not exactly friends, although they necessarily spent much time in one another's company. They were not, as Mrs. Priestley would explain, of *quite* the same social standing. Mrs. Priestley was well-connected. Her husband had been a Civil Servant, employed in the offices of the Board of Education, as it was known in his day and as his widow continued to call it. She had had ancestors in the Army and the Church, to whom she could refer with precision ; the best example being a grandfather who had been wounded in the Peninsular. Mrs. Priestley had his medals, both of them, in her sitting-room, mounted on a velvet-covered shield displayed under a small dome of glass.

Miss Latimer kept a boarding house. It came to that, even if she had but two boarders, and those permanent ones. The other was her brother, the head master of the Council, or, as Mrs. Priestley called it, the Board School ; a silent man of fifty or so, with a black and white spade beard. And the Latimers' ancestry was negligible. They had had a father and mother, the former a managing

clerk in rather a poor way to a firm of solicitors in Bristol; but behind them only the vaguest and most undistinguished of grandparents.

These nice distinctions were the more necessary in that the people of Zeal-Afford, including the squire, his wife and the Orpins, were carelessly apt to dump Mrs. Priestley into the same social scale as Miss Latimer and her brother. They were asked to the same functions, quite often on the same card, as if they belonged to the same family! And when a lady such as Mrs. Priestley lives much alone, reads hardly at all, and has little else to think about, these nice distinctions seem, at times, to matter tremendously.

Fortunately, even in such a retired and solitary existence as hers had been for the past twenty years, life occasionally offered distractions that for the moment diverted Mrs. Priestley from the contemplation of her pet grievance. Four years earlier, for example, life had offered her the distraction of close contact with the sins of Annie Close, who had at that time been Miss Latimer's maid-of-all-work.

To the village at large the affair had been commonplace enough, and Annie had found another man to marry her before the child was born. But Mrs. Priestley's feelings about "moral questions" were passionately sincere. To her, they were even more important than her own social position. She had, indeed, worked herself up to the "verge of a nervous breakdown" (that was what Dr. Moulton had called it), over the affair of Annie Close—an

affair that as Mrs. Priestley saw so clearly now, had "only been the beginning."

She put that aspect of the affair very plainly to Mrs. Orpin and Miss Latimer over the tea-table at The Elms on the afternoon of Abby's return to the cottage.

"I didn't like Mrs. Wing's attitude about the girl, not at the time," she explained. "But it was more than that, much more. I felt, then, very strongly, and I'm sure I must have told you so, while it was all being so very painful and unsatisfactory, that Mrs. Wing was *hiding* something. I don't mean any fault of her own, but an opinion. Yes, she was hiding her opinions from me; and that could only mean that she was ashamed of them.

"I remember the occasion, or more particularly one occasion, very distinctly. I had *asked* Mrs. Wing to come and see me, because I felt that she ought to do something, her husband being away at the war and there being no one else at the Hall with any sort of authority. And when she came, I put it to her very plainly that the girl ought to be *punished* in some way. I felt so then; and I do still. But Mrs. Wing gave me no support—really no support at all; and I could only understand from her peculiarly marked lack of what I can only call proper feeling or at least her complete failure to show it in any way, that however quiet she chose to keep about it, she was not on *our* side; not on our side, Mrs. Orpin, the side of the Church and of all right-minded people."

"I'm greatly afraid that that's true, Mrs. Priestley," Mrs Orpin acknowledged gravely. She had spent an uncomfortable half-hour or so, after Tristram had left that morning, and she was glad to recover her certainty of how right she had been from first to last. It was like coming home again after paying an uncomfortable visit to strange people.

"I've *never* trusted her. Never," Miss Latimer put in dryly.

"One's so very sorry for *him*," Mrs. Orpin remarked thoughtfully.

"Such a sterling, straightforward man, I'm sure," Mrs. Priestley agreed.

"But perhaps a little weak," Mrs. Orpin amended. "Though, of course, in an affair of this sort one could hardly expect him to see all that's going on."

"Has he been to see you again?" Miss Latimer asked, knowing the answer to her question, but anxious now to get to the real topic of the afternoon, the topic which she and Mrs. Priestley had so far been diplomatically postponing.

"This morning," Mrs. Orpin acknowledged. "Both of us. My husband sent for me."

Mrs. Priestley sighed and filled up the tea-pot. "That was before they went into Exeter, of course," she said. "We saw them as they returned."

"They'd put *him* alone at the back, as you may have heard," Miss Latimer added. "Such a very strange-looking man."

"Disgusting, I think," Mrs. Orpin said. "I'm sorry for poor Mrs. Harrison, having to do for him."

"I remember what she told you last time, about his washing," Miss Latimer commented.

"But what did poor Mr. Wing *say*?" interjected Mrs. Priestley, who did not approve the change of subject. (It was so like Miss Latimer to go off on to those unpleasant details. But people of her class . . .) "How did he excuse himself, or her, for letting the man come back again after what had happened?"

"He's still determined to brazen it out, you see," Mrs. Orpin explained. "And I've wondered——" She paused, suffering a last faint qualm at the thought of what Tristram had said in her husband's study that morning; and then seduced by the intent, listening faces of her audience, she continued with a touch of defiance that was certainly not directed at them: "I've wondered, I wondered very seriously this morning, if he really *believes* in his wife's innocence!"

"Is it possible?" murmured Mrs. Priestley, controlling her eagerness with the habitual delicacy of the conscious gentlewoman.

Miss Latimer was less refined. "You don't say so, Mrs. Orpin," she gasped. "Now why do you think that?"

Mrs. Orpin paused no longer. She had firmly set her face now along the path of self-justification. "It was not so much what he said," she confided to them, lowering her voice, "as his manner. It was the manner, both this morning and last Friday, of a man who is, what shall I say, a little desperate? He was so unlike his usual self. He lost his usual

politeness. I'm sorry to have to say it, but he did. And I thought to myself, this morning, this man has had a shock, a very severe shock of some kind. It worried me. My husband noticed how worried I was looking at lunch-time to-day. Because, you know, if I'm right about his having had a shock, and I'm perfectly sure that I am, what else could it be? Besides which, it does so clearly account for everything."

"But surely he wouldn't have had the man back——" Mrs. Priestley suggested, and instinctively the three of them drew closer together about the tea-table.

"That's what is so extraordinarily clever of him—or her," Mrs. Orpin continued confidentially. "Personally, I should be inclined to attribute the idea to her. You see they're doing it to throw dust in our eyes. No doubt they've agreed, seeing that the story was all over the parish, that the only hope of convincing us was for the three of them to be seen about together. They thought that we should all say, just as Mrs. Priestley has just said, that if there were anything in it they'd never have him back."

"But then you think he's forgiven her? That he's going to overlook it?" Mrs. Priestley asked on a note of just astonishment.

"Infatuated," Mrs. Orpin explained. "He's simply infatuated with her."

"Well!" ejaculated Miss Latimer.

Mrs. Priestley sat back and pressed her lips together. "I'm afraid; I'm very much afraid,

Mrs. Orpin," she said gravely, after a pause, "that you may be right."

"She's got such queer notions about things."

"Extremely dangerous and, in my opinion, improper notions. Those poor little girls of hers——"

"All those years ago, when she came to see me about that girl Annie, I had my suspicions, the very gravest suspicions."

"So bad for the village boys, putting goodness knows what ideas into their heads."

"And her dress. It has struck me several times as being immodest—almost indecent. Don't you agree with me, Mrs. Orpin?"

Mrs. Orpin did, and said so.

"All the same it does seem a little strange to me," Miss Latimer put in, "that Mr. Wing . . . if there has been anything . . . and he knows about it, should——"

"He has had a tremendous shock," Mrs. Orpin repeated. "You'll know exactly what I mean, next time you meet him. And it's altered him. Really, he wasn't the same man he used to be, this morning. I assure you that he was positively rude to my husband and me. He accused us, though you'll hardly believe it, of gossiping about Mrs. Wing."

"Well, in my opinion," Mrs. Priestley said, "something ought to be done about it. Women like that ought to be *punished*."

No one can say, least of all Mrs. Priestley herself, at what point in her meditations suspicion definitely merged into a passionate conviction.

For twenty-four hours after that tea-party she brooded profoundly, and Miss Latimer, who associated these fits of brooding with a personal grievance, watched her at meal-times with an expression, half-resentful, half-anxious, that wavered between "What is it now, I wonder?" and "I'm sure I do everything I *can* to please her."

Poor Miss Latimer always suffered at such times as these. Experience had never taught her to await the event, and she fretted herself into a fever in her attempts to guess the grievance before it was stated.

Inquiry at headquarters was quite useless, but it was invariably made. Miss Latimer knew by the way Mrs. Priestley sat down to breakfast the next morning that another attack was imminent and impatiently opened the usual ritual.

"Is anything the matter this morning, Mrs. Priestley?"

"Nothing, thank you, Miss Latimer. Why should there be?"

"I thought you didn't look quite yourself, that's all."

"I'm perfectly well, thank you, Miss Latimer."

"Well, if there is anything wrong, I'm sure I hope you'll tell me, Mrs. Priestley."

"There's nothing wrong, I assure you, Miss Latimer."

And William Latimer was no sort of use to his sister on these occasions ; not even as a confidant when Mrs. Priestley had retired to brood at large in her own sitting-room. He would sometimes nod his head, but he rarely spoke ; and you could never be sure if he understood what you were saying to him.

He had a strange inclination for the study of foreign languages, and had acquired what might be called a fair visual knowledge of quite a large number, although, as he pronounced them all alike, in his mind, using whenever possible the exact value of the English consonants and vowels, he could not have made his simplest wish understood by word of mouth in any one of them.

His sister sometimes sighed over this curious preoccupation of his but had never tried to wean him from it. " It gave him something to think about," she supposed, in a village that provided so few subjects for thought. Her real grievance was that in a house that he had overcrowded with books as the result of twenty-five years' devotion to his hobby, there was none that she could read.

" Another of her ' attacks ' coming on, I can see," she said, when Mrs. Priestley had gone.

Her brother nodded and combed his beard with his fingers. He had recently begun a study of the Scandinavian languages and had received a Danish Bible by post that morning. He always began his studies with the aid of the Bible. It was the only book that had been translated into all tongues.

And while Mr. Latimer was absorbed in a patient

comparison of his English and Danish Bibles ; and his sister—in the intervals of restrained gossip with the “ girl ” from whom she obtained no further light on the subject of Mrs. Wing’s probable guilt—racked her memory for some possible explanation of this last “ attack ” ; Mrs. Priestley slowly and imperceptibly passed from the stage of suspicion to that of conviction.

“ Now for it, I suppose ! ” was Miss Latimer’s unuttered exclamation when she brought in the tea, which she always took with Mrs. Priestley in her own sitting-room. She knew the signs, and, no longer impatient, waited silently for her companion to begin. And presently the pinched lips and worried frown of Mrs. Priestley, the little fidgety nervous movements of her hands and head, found relief in familiar words.

“ Something will have to be done about it,” she said, with the air of one who will not be thwarted for another minute.

“ Very well, Mrs. Priestley. But first, I must know about what,” replied Miss Latimer, according to custom.

“ That woman at the Hall,” was the unexpected reply.

Miss Latimer, who had been wavering between a doubtfully hot water-bottle and a hard-boiled egg, could not instantly recover from the sense of being personally attacked.

“ Well, I’m sure, Mrs. Priestley——” she began automatically, before she realised with a feeling of relief that on this occasion she was not the culprit.

"You may well be sure, Miss Latimer," Mrs. Priestly continued, fairly trembling with gentility as she ate her bread-and-butter. "But that is not the point, which is what are we—you and I and the vicar and all the rest of the parish—going to do about it. Are we going to sit still and say nothing or are we going to make a protest? Personally, I intend to write to the vicar and tell him precisely what I think about the whole disgusting affair. I shall tell him quite plainly that I, for one, will not stop in the place if that woman is allowed to go on flaunting her wickedness in our faces like this."

"No," agreed Miss Latimer, somewhat doubtfully, for, however vexatious the incidental troubles, she had no wish to lose her boarder.

"If only for the sake of all the young women in the village," Mrs. Priestley continued.

"But what do you think the vicar could do?" Miss Latimer inquired.

"He must go and tax her to her face; confront her with her shame. And if he won't do it, I will," Mrs. Priestley said so fiercely that Miss Latimer had an uneasy feeling that somehow or another she was being held responsible for all that had happened.

"Well, I suppose it is his place to do that," she agreed soothingly; "though he might not like to have to."

"I shall insist," Mrs. Priestley said firmly.

"I quite agree that he ought to," Miss Latimer replied. "And there'd be no harm in writing, in the first instance. And you're quite sure in your

own mind then, Mrs. Priestley, that there *has* been something ? ”

“ Aren’t you ? ” Mrs. Priestley inquired in a tone that admitted of but one answer.

“ I ? Well, I am, in my own mind,” Miss Latimer said ; “ and I suppose every one would be, knowing what we do.” This was the side of the affair that appealed to her and she would have preferred to discuss it all over again from the beginning, rather than consider possible methods of retribution. She had not the evangelist spirit of her companion.

“ I shall write to him at once,” Mrs. Priestley announced, getting up from the tea-table, although barely a quarter of their usual hour had elapsed. “ Perhaps you could find some one who would take the letter up to the vicarage for me, Miss Latimer.”

“ Mary Tebbitt’s Alice could take it, no doubt. I’ll see,” Miss Latimer said, putting the tea-things together. This was not one of the usual rows, but she thought Mrs. Priestley’s manner was distinctly odd ; cutting short the tea like that when there was so much to talk about. It was possible, after all, that the egg or the hot-water bottle had had something to do with it. Mrs. Priestley was such a one to brood over things.

3

Mrs. Tebbitt’s Alice caught the vicar pottering about among the rose-trees. Nominally, he was gardening. He was wearing leather gauntlets and

had a pruning-knife in his hand. Actually, he was trying to confirm by his own observation, the statement that ants "milk" the green-fly to the benefit of both species.

The vicar had a leaning towards entomology. He liked to stand watching an insect and vaguely speculating as to the meeting point of instinct and intelligence. He had read Lubbock and various translations from Fabre's *Souvenirs*, and would have liked to read Darwin, whose works, for obvious reasons, were debarred from him. Indeed, in other circumstances, and with an entirely different training, Mr. Orpin might have been quite a useful, though he would never have been a brilliant, entomologist. He had the necessary patience to observe, without the ingenuity to devise test experiments. Unfortunately, his wife was unsympathetic in this particular, and had demonstrated quite clearly twenty-five years earlier that she considered the observation of insects to be a waste of time. And as the vicar had had to recognise that she had the best of the argument from both the spiritual and worldly points of view, his investigations had never passed the elementary stage of the tentative amateur, and had always been conducted irregularly and furtively. There are some vices, no doubt, the joys of which are greatly enhanced by being indulged secretly, but entomology is not one of them.

The vicar gave the nervous start of one surprised in wrongdoing when Mrs. Tebbitt's Alice caught him among the rose-trees, and then realising that she did not represent a message from his wife,

dropped his head and peered at her over his spectacles.

It was one of the strange dispensations of Providence that while he could watch the forbidden insects with comfort and great clearness through his glasses, he could observe humanity, his peculiar charge, only with a certain amount of physical discomfort.

"Ah! yes; from Mrs. Priestley," he said, accepting the silently proffered note. "Was there to be an answer, Alice?"

Alice curtseyed again. "Please, sir, 'twas Miss Latimer gave I the letter," she explained, "and she didn't say nothin' but who it were to."

The vicar gave her sixpence; she was a nicely-behaved, pretty little girl.

After he had read the note, he reluctantly sought his wife who, at this time on Tuesday afternoons, was usefully engaged with the accounts of the Coal Club.

"My dear, another note from Mrs. Priestley," he said, laying it on her desk.

Mrs. Orpin stiffened defensively. She remembered suddenly and with unpleasant accuracy some of the things she had said at that tea-party the day before. She saw now that she had been foolish to say them to a woman like Mrs. Priestley, who was not exactly mad, but certainly a little queer at times, and might mis-report the simplest and most innocent statements.

"She's not quite right in her head, I'm afraid," Mrs. Orpin said, as she picked up the letter. "I saw her yesterday, and I was afraid then that she

had another of her attacks coming on. What is it now, the altar-vases again or the improper habits of the village boys? "

"I'm afraid it's something worse than either," the vicar acknowledged. "However, read it, my dear, read it."

Mrs. Orpin bent down over her desk. There were occasions on which her husband's habit of peering at you was distinctly embarrassing.

She was greatly relieved to find that no reference had been made by Mrs. Priestley to her authority. She had taken the facts for granted. Mrs. Wing was assumed to be the scarlet woman beyond all question, and the writer had devoted all her energies towards stirring up the "Minister of God" (he was exhorted in these terms four or five times), to that state of religious ecstasy in which it would be possible for him boldly to confound sin and to brand the sinner without pity. (The inference to be read by the expert, but not by either of the Orpins, was that the outwardly mild and respectable Mrs. Priestley passionately longed to inflict the grossest physical punishment upon Brenda's too delightful body. She could not, for example, restrain herself in the use of the word "brand," which was repeated much too often and sometimes almost irrelevantly. In Mrs. Priestley's mind the "brand," no doubt, was always white hot.)

"Well, really!" Mrs. Orpin exclaimed, laying the letter down and turning back to face her husband, she added: "Though, of course, one can understand her feeling to a certain extent." She believed

now, that she was quite safe, and was greatly surprised and a little shocked when her husband said :

“ What did you say to her when you saw her yesterday, my dear ? ”

“ Yesterday ? Oh ! of course, I did see her yesterday,” Mrs. Orpin replied, thinking very rapidly. “ But I don’t fancy that the subject of Mrs. Wing was even mentioned. No ; not even mentioned, so far as I can remember. We were discussing the prospects of the harvest festival, everything is so unusually early this year ; and I do so particularly want to arrange the decorations so that Mrs. Priestley shall have no cause for complaint. She can have the font or the pulpit or the lectern, whichever she pleases ; but the trouble is to get her to say plainly what it is she *does want*. However, the question now is, what we are going to do about this note of hers.”

“ Ah ! I’m glad that you said nothing more to her, or Miss Latimer, about the Wings,” Orpin said, with genuine relief. He had often hidden, and lied about, his secret indulgences in entomology, but it never occurred to him that his wife might lie about her own temptations. He did not know that she had any.

“ She writes, of course, as if we were living in the Middle Ages,” Mrs. Orpin remarked, feeling that she had said quite enough to exculpate herself. Over-insistence is such a mistake, in these matters.

“ Precisely ; precisely,” agreed the vicar, peering absentmindedly out of the window. “ Impossible

for me, of course, to say anything more to the Wings after the way he took my note in the first place. It's a pity, a great pity, that he should have had that artist fellow back again."

"But what can we do to—to appease Mrs. Priestley?" his wife asked. It had occurred to her that if that lady insisted on seeing the vicar, she might let fall various unnecessary statements as to the sources of her information.

The vicar sighed and shook his head.

"Perhaps I had better see her?" Mrs. Orpin suggested.

"It might be as well," her husband agreed. "You can point out to her, for example, that however much appearances are against Mrs. Wing, we have no positive evidence of—er—of actual misconduct. She is a foolishly impulsive woman, I imagine, in some respects."

Mrs. Orpin looked down at her accounts. "Personally," she said, "although I wouldn't say so to any one but you, I have no doubt whatever that she has been unfaithful to her husband, and that he knows it."

"Ah!" commented the vicar pensively, and then after a short pause, "Ah! well; poor fellow; poor fellow. It accounts, of course, for his unnecessary heat in defending her."

"Precisely," Mrs. Orpin agreed.

"And with regard to Mrs. Priestley?"

Mrs. Orpin looked at the clock. "It's barely six yet," she said. "I shall have time to run down before supper."

“ Very good of you, my dear. Very good of you,” her husband murmured. “ She’s a tiresome woman, distinctly tiresome. Ah ! I was just cutting some dead wood out of the rose-bushes. I think, perhaps, I’d—ah—better finish doing that while you’re gone.”

4

Mrs. Priestley was temporarily assuaged by the prompt answer she received to the militant exhortations of her letter. It was satisfactory to realise that one’s opinion had some weight at the vicarage, even if the vicar and his wife were inclined to be dilatory in such an important matter as the denunciation of the great Scarlet Sin.

Mrs. Orpin’s effort, it seems, had all been directed to quenching the active fury of this, to her, rather dangerous outbreak. She had indulged herself in the use of flattery, had given definite promises, and indefinite hints that went further still ; playing for safety at the same time by dwelling on the necessity of waiting until the last damning pieces of evidence were forthcoming, as—and this was where those vague implications showed most clearly—they would be, very soon.

She had believed that all that was necessary was to stave the old lady off for a day or two ; reduce this explosive boiling to a gentle simmer and so cool her down by degrees. All this sort of thing had happened before, so many times ; the chief difference being that in the present case the old

lady had some excuse for her attack. It was her method only that was so unreasonable. She took things in such a very queer way, a way that Mrs. Orpin could not understand.

For, really, so far as she was interested in this particular matter, Mrs. Orpin was, she assured herself, prepared to shrug her handsome shoulders and leave Mrs. Wing and her lover to work out their own damnation. It would teach Mr. Wing a lesson that he was badly in need of. If he were such an optimistic blind fool as to throw them together, deliberately, trusting to their good-feeling or whatever it was—well, he deserved all that he would undoubtedly get. The lover, this weedy artist person, was a very poor creature, but no doubt he had an attraction—an unpleasant, perverted kind of attraction—for a woman like Mrs. Wing, who had already shown that she had an unpleasant, perverted mind by exhibiting her daughters' nakedness in the Hall gardens. Oh! yes, so far as Mrs. Orpin was concerned, the guilty pair might cut their own throats.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Priestley, not quite off the boil, continued to simmer.

V

ABBY

I

ABBY knew, and knew with a finer clarity and sureness than the average man or woman ever attains to, that this summer and autumn were to mark the supreme crisis of his life. His relations with Hildegarde, her influence on him, had given him an opportunity to hold himself still for a time, to keep quiet and take a view of himself, his past, and his future.

He had had no experience of such an interval before he met her. He had been the one black sheep in a family of six, a sheep of an entirely different colour and disposition from his younger brothers and sisters. All of them had hated him, including his father ; and his only revenge had been to draw them, vindictively. He could not remember the time when he had not been able to draw.

Even as a small boy, he had thought it queer that his family should find so much pleasure in living regular lives and keeping clean. It did not seem to him to matter. They wasted hours every week in making him wash and punishing him for not washing—that and the doing of things according to some precise ideal of how they “ought to be done,” was all they lived for ; while he, himself, was perfectly clear in his own mind that life had

been given to him to get ideas and so far as might be, to express them. That drawing he had done with burnt sticks on the bedroom wall was, he knew it, worth far more than the cost of re-papering the room. His drawing had expressed something; which was more than any wallpaper in their house had ever done.

And then, when he was sixteen, the explanation had been given to him. It had been his brother, a sturdy, fresh-faced boy two years younger than Abby, who had made things clear to him.

"Mother isn't your mother; not our mother, isn't," had been his opening.

They shared a bedroom, and all that Sunday afternoon and evening Abby had been locked into it because he "wouldn't behave himself," not according to their standards, that is to say. He knew that it was impossible, and he never tried. If you were going to attempt the impossible, it would only be for something that was worth while.

"What the hell are you getting at?" Abby had demanded.

Claude had not blenched. He was used to Abby's swearing.

"Mother, our mother, told me after tea," he had said. "She thought it was about time you knew too. I think she and father had been talking about it. She didn't say I was to tell you, but she didn't say I wasn't to."

Abby had sat up in his untidy bed, grabbed a blanket that was sliding on to the floor, and wrapped himself in it.

"Well, get on," he had said.

Claude had been undressing, neatly folding up his things as he took them off, though his instructed sense of order had not prevented him from kicking Abby's shirt into the fireplace when he had caught his foot in it.

"Your mother ran away and got killed three months after you were born," he had explained, "There was something awfully funny about her as far as I could make out. Father never speaks about her, mother said. She was bad, somehow, frightfully bad—wicked, you know; and mother thinks that's why you're like you are. I expect father does, too."

Claude, no doubt, had expected his half-brother to wilt at this news, to be overcome with shame and horror; but Abby had jumped up, thrown off the blanket and ecstatically cracking his slender fingers, had exclaimed exultantly:

"Oh! free! free! I'm free!"

"How d'you mean 'free'?" the shocked Claude had asked.

Abby had not condescended to explain, neither then nor when he had confronted his father next morning, to say "Father, you've got to let me go my own way. What do you want to keep me here for? I don't belong here. I want to go to an Art school and live away from home. If you won't let me, I shall run away like mother did."

After that there had been five days of agonising. Mr. Mattocks had had scruples of the finest moral complexion, and his wife, whose sole anxiety was

to get her stepson out of the house as soon as possible, had had to defer outwardly while she secretly pursued her own purpose. Finally, Mr. Mattocks had tried to salve his conscience by making Abby an allowance of £100 a year.

And upon this allowance Abby had alternately feasted and starved ever since, sometimes in London and sometimes in Paris. Now and again he had sold a picture or a drawing in an emergency, but always against his inclination. He had had but one ideal and one responsibility—his Art. He sought neither fame nor money, but only the ecstasy of satisfying the fierce lust for expressing the ideas that burned in him.

The pursuit of this ideal had led him, unfortunately, to misuse his body. With his almost complete lack of any moral sense, as we know it, he lacked also any sense of responsibility even to himself. And when after sixteen years of bondage he had suddenly found his freedom, he had reacted too violently. There had been nothing then to restrain him when his inspiration failed, when life ceased to be full of wonderful visions that might by ardent toil find a partial translation; and he had sought to revive his mind and his spirit at these times by stimulating the emotions. Women, drink, and drugs had all served their turn, more or less efficiently at the moment, but like other medicines they lost their potency by repeated use, and the dose had to be increased. When Abby had first met his Hildegarde, some three weeks earlier, he had been in a very bad way. He had, by then,

lost much of the power and even the inclination to work.

The introduction to the Wings had come about through the intermediacy of the famous painter, Gregor Keynes, whom Brenda had known all her life. Keynes had chanced to be in London for a couple of nights at the end of July and had gone into the Café Royal. Abby, happily drunk, had spotted him, and feeling very much in the mood, had gone across to him and delivered himself very frankly of what he thought of Keynes's art.

"You," Abby had concluded, "perform, my dear sir, the functions of the *camera lucida*. You make small reproductions of the outsides of things—without, of course, being able to reproduce any feeling of movement. Yours, m' dear sir, is the craft of a workman, but oh! m' dear sir, what a damnable, silly craft! Excuse my apparent egotism, but I can express more in a line than you can in the whole of one o' your damn fat canvasses."

"Can, or could—once?" had been Keynes's reply. He was an intelligent man, and he knew that Abby had genius.

Abby had suddenly become maudlin at that question, and Keynes had found it in his heart the next day to tell the whole story in a letter to Brenda, who, in turn, had impulsively written to Abby, and asked him to come and stay at the cottage.

He had accepted without hesitation. London was unbearably hot and gritty; he had no money, and he had found a frank, appealing quality in Brenda's letter that had stirred his imagination.

And then, Brenda, herself, had been a revelation to him. She was the first woman he had met who was in some unanalysable way his own kind. She was "free" and no reckless, desperate courtesan he had known, had ever been free. The courtesans he had known were always trying to persuade themselves either that they could do whatever they liked; or liked whatever they were doing.

2

What he had to decide now was whether he had enough strength of will, enough desire, enough pleasure in himself, to live quietly and go on working without Brenda's immediate presence; or failing that, if it would not be better for him to set about his dying without more ado? He thought that brandy would probably do the job for him in a few weeks. He could easily borrow a hundred pounds from Wing.

While he had been in London between his two visits to Zeal-Afford, he had had no doubt. He was still vibrating, then, with the thrills of that last wonderful talk and his moonlight parting from Hildegarde on the terrace; and he had quite made up his mind when he wrote to her that it was absolutely impossible for him to live without her help. The alternatives, then, had been between death and entire possession of her.

Brenda's new detachment of attitude had thrown a new light on the situation. With one of his violent reactions, he had completely abandoned the hope

of ever possessing her, when she had left him in the cottage that evening—gone off with her husband, without shaking hands or a single backward glance. He knew then, with an awful certainty, that she would never be more to him than she was now, and that they would not again touch the heights they had reached on the terrace.

She had changed in that short interval. She seemed to him now something less than she had been, less perfect, less free. She had allowed herself to become the slave of circumstance. She was still one of his own kind, but she was not being true to herself, she was making a truce with the Philistines.

Nevertheless, she had begun to put him on his feet again; and the thought of her as she might have been if she had not fallen below her own ideals was by way of being a stimulus. He might still succeed even if she had failed, and he could never forget what she had said to him, more particularly how she had pointed out that his submission to drink and drugs was the worst kind of slavery. That was true. He had never thought of it like that before, but he had seen it then. You might be independent of other people's influence and opinions and still be a slave to your own body. To be really free, as she had said, you must be master of yourself. That, she had declared, was the only true liberty. And he had known that she was right.

But it was a very difficult task to become master of yourself, difficult and sometimes horribly tedious; and he was not sure if it were worth while—if, indeed, anything were worth while?

Tuesday morning found him still tangled in a mood of strenuous indecision. The problem of himself worried him, presenting itself with a feverish quality of decisive alternatives that admitted no opportunity for compromise. He was aware of himself as standing on a narrow path that ran along the edge of an abyss. To extricate himself, he must make an immense and sustained effort, but he did not want to throw himself into the profundities below him until he had done something to prove that Hildegarde had once been right and was now wrong. And that meant that he must work; which was the very devil, because he was not in the mood for work.

Abby, like Brenda, had never preached a gospel, but if he had it would have been summed up in the advice: Never try to work when you're not in the mood. Nevertheless, on this critical morning of vast alternatives and new beginnings, he decided to attempt what he had always believed was, for him, impossible. He saw the decision as having a definitely Philistine and contemptible quality. It was of the same order as getting to an office at half-past nine or doing Swedish exercises after a cold bath. But it would be, at least, a new experience for him, and he was conscious of a faint thrill of adventure in making the essay.

He had all the materials of his craft—provided for him by Brenda—in that little empty bedroom with the north light, and when he had finished his breakfast he went up there to attempt this strange, new employment.

It was nearly eleven o'clock, and at the outset his attention was distracted by the effect of the sunlight on the trees in the wood—beech, elm, oak, ash, and, more distantly, a little cluster of silver birches, delicately apart, on the lower slope of the hill. He remembered how he had noticed before that that particular group of trees and the contours of the wood and hill to the left happened to "compose." In the right mood, he might paint them; but, he shrugged his shoulders, it would be folly to attempt that this morning. He would have to be right on the top of his form to get the feeling of a composition like that.

He turned away from the window with a sigh, pinned a sheet of white paper on to a board, put it on the easel, and picked up a stick of charcoal. After that he stood perfectly still for quite five minutes, staring at the board with the deeply-interested look of one who studies a complicated design. At the end of that time, he made a step forward, raised his hand, hesitated, then put half a dozen dots and broken lines on the paper, and stood back with the beginnings of a smile at the corners of his mouth.

"Old Fullerton," he murmured—he often talked aloud to himself when he was working. "Rum that he should come to me like that. Well, let's put him in anyway." And at first rather tentatively, but afterwards with a beautiful certainty, he drew an enormous, inert-looking blue-bottle—a shabby, dusty fly with a partly crumpled wing, that had quite certainly been recently stirred out of its

winter sleep. And although he had not given it a human face, it somehow bore a distinct resemblance to Brenda's father.

"That's all right, of course," Abby said, laying down the chalk and seating himself on the edge of the little deal table. "Clever, damned clever, and all the rest of it; but it isn't Work. I'd probably have been all as good as Max if I'd wanted to do caricatures; and not quite so damned literary either. Only, I don't want. Except to amuse the children. And now, what?"

He looked out of the window again, and this time remembered that Brenda had begged him to paint the view of the tumbling stream and the open pool beyond, as seen from the bridge at the bottom of the garden. He had laughed at her at the time, and told her that she had, like most people, a weakness for the chocolate-box school, which was why she could bear to sit in a room with a picture by Gregor Keynes. But he had known that there was a way of getting that view which would be good art. With that perfect memory both for form and colour which was one of his endowments, he recalled the line of the high banks, the sheltering curve of the trees, the dark greens and dull oily blues of the water in the shadows, leading up, well out of the centre of the picture, to that clean contrast of yellow sunlight about the pool.

"If one could get that, of course. . . ." But would Abby Mattocks ever be able to "get" that sort of thing again? Certainly not this morning, when he was so obviously not in the right mood.

But he knew what he could do. He could go and paint that stream just as Gregor Keynes would paint it. And to do that would probably be *work*, in the sense that the bank-clerk talked of work. Also, the time might not be altogether wasted. While he was making his "photograph" on the *camera lucida* principle, he might get an inspiration to do the thing properly. Finally, it would be amusing. He could always take a certain amount of pleasure in his wonderful gift for accurate draughtsmanship; although it gave him an uneasy conscience—this being the only way in which his conscience had, so far, manifested itself.

3

Tristram found him on the bridge the same afternoon.

"By Jove, old chap, that's good," he exclaimed, looking at the already well-marked suggestions of the coming picture.

"Think so?" Abby asked innocently.

"Rather," Tristram agreed warmly. He had not hitherto found himself able to admire wholeheartedly any of Abby's work, finding some quality in it that, to him, was slightly repulsive; and he was glad to be able on this occasion to praise without qualification. "Absolutely top-hole. I don't pretend to know anything about Art, as you know; but there can't be any doubt about this being good."

Abby sighed. "This isn't Art," he said. "It's

photography. I'm only copying. Sort of thing the steel-plate engraver can do, or the lithographer."

Tristram found himself checked, as he usually did when he tried to talk to Abby. He could never quite convince himself that the fellow really meant what he said. Either he was pulling your leg or else he was posing, Tristram had thought. But to-day he made an effort to overcome the obstacle that appeared to be interposed between Abby's mind and his own.

"I don't understand that," he said in a friendly voice. "I'm an awful ass, no doubt, about these things. I wish you could explain them to me."

Abby looked up for a moment with that dumb, wistful gaze of his which always made Tristram think of a melancholy monkey.

"Explain? What?" he asked.

"Well, to begin with, why that picture you're making isn't in your opinion—er—good Art?" Tristram tried.

"I told you why," Abby replied. "It's just copying and matching the colours. It's mechanical."

"Damned clever all the same," Tristram said. "It isn't everybody who could do it."

"Lord, no!" Abby agreed whole-heartedly.

"But that isn't Art, eh?" Tristram suggested.

"Well, hardly."

"What is? Can't you put it into words?"

Abby was proceeding diligently with his painting. He did not interrupt his work as he said: "Art, m'dear sir, is creation. It's creating the symbol of a universal truth that wasn't recognised until

the artist showed it. And then, of course," he continued, pausing and turning round, "every real work of Art is unique. If I could paint this thing here, for instance, as it might be painted, no one could ever do it again, because there would be nothing left to do."

Tristram was patiently trying to understand. "And you can never do that by making as nearly as you can an exact copy of what one sees?" he inquired.

Abby turned back to his work again. "No two people see the same thing," he said. "What one's got to do is to express the sense of it, universalise it—you know, say something about it that's never been said before and never can be again; and yet something that joins it up to all the best pictures there are. I think I can hear your wife coming."

Tristram had not heard her, but Abby was right, and the next moment she came into sight round the curve of the drive.

"Oh! you've found him, have you?" she said, as she approached them. "I went up to the cottage, *and*"—she looked hard at Abby as she concluded—"into the studio."

"Oh! Lord! I forgot. I meant to burn it," Abby said.

"What?" Tristram inquired, still rather ruefully wondering why *he* had not heard Brenda coming.

"A caricature of my father that I have impounded," Brenda said.

"It wasn't fixed, you know," Abby put in.

"I did that, before I uninned it," Brenda said. "I knew where to find the spray."

"It *was* rather good," Abby murmured. "I don't much mind your keeping it."

"Somewhere where the original is never likely to come across it," Brenda added.

"Quite safe for him to see it. Absolutely," Abby assured her. "He'd never know, never in the world, that it was meant for him. They never do, not the people themselves."

While they had been talking Abby had been standing in front of his easel, but now he moved aside with just one quick glance at Brenda, that she instantly interpreted as an invitation to inspect the beginnings of his picture.

At first she stood a reasonable distance, some five or six feet, perhaps, away from it, but after a moment she moved nearer to it and then nearer still.

Abby began to smile.

Tristram, watching them both attentively, and uncomfortably conscious of the rapidity and ease with which they understood one another, was waiting anxiously for Brenda's verdict. He hoped, a trifle desperately, that she might confirm his own opinion.

Her first comment destroyed that hope beyond repair. "What's it *for*, Abby?" she asked.

"That, m' dear lady," Abby said, "is what *they* call 'work.'"

"Hm! It's very pretty," Brenda said, sighed, and then sat down on Abby's camp-stool. She was still gazing intently at his canvas as she continued, "I believe it's the only way, Abby. How do you feel after it?"

"As if I'd won a prize for good attendance," he said.

"Might do worse, for a beginning," she replied.

"I'm going to sign it 'G.K.,' and get five hundred pounds for it," Abby explained.

Brenda, still studying the canvas, shook her head. "They'd know," she said. "Even I should know. There are bits of Abby Mattocks showing here and there, even in this. You may draw as accurately as you like, m' dear sir, but when it comes to colour. . . ."

Abby stood a little farther back and cocked his head on one side. "M'yes. Perhaps. You may be right," he admitted rather grudgingly. "I must have got interested in one or two places. Yes, now I come to think of it, I did. Second-rate for me, of course, but it's true that nobody else could have done them as well."

"But, Abby," Brenda pleaded, turning round and gazing up at him. "Isn't it possible that if you go on *working*, working like this, for instance, that it will all come back, the right mood and the power and everything, without . . . without any other stimulus?"

And on the spur of the moment Abby made his decision. "I'm going to try," he said, with a new note in his voice. "I'll finish this abortion, honestly and conscientiously, *à la* G.K. And I'm not without hope that . . . But I suppose I shall see you, now and again? Just to report progress and so on? What?"

"Well, of course," Brenda assured him.

VI

VARIOUS SIDELIGHTS

I

THAT talk with Abby on the bridge, and the subsequent conversation between him and Brenda, had given Tristram new material for thought. It was to him as if he had suddenly discovered a new quantity that must be included in his equation; a quantity that added enormously to the difficulties of his statement.

Until then the problem he had set himself to understand had been comparatively simple. There had been but two factors to consider: (1) his own and Brenda's attitude towards the *affaire Abby*; (2) that of the Orpins, Mrs. Priestley, and the village in general. The Fullertons, he had decided, were negligible in this connection. They might have attitudes—it would be difficult to avoid that—but their opinions were evidently dictated by purely personal considerations, and did not count. And all that had to be decided was whether (1) or (2) was right. At first he had assumed the rightness of (1) as an absolute; but later, he had guessed that there might be something to be said for (2), and had decided that his equation would produce

a result that gave the proportion between the two factors.

All this statement, however, had depended upon two primary assumptions ; the first of which was that in so far as he was considering abstract morality, he was dealing with absolutes. He had started with the firm premise that Brenda had been absolutely moral in her relations with Abby, inasmuch as the sole test in this relation was purely physical. He had, therefore, condemned the Orpins and their adherents as being absolutely wrong about a matter of fact.

The second assumption followed with a sweet and logical naturalness. The Orpin faction could be made to understand that they were wrong in this particular ; he could explain to them that Brenda had ideas different from their own in certain particulars ; and once the faction had grasped the true significance of this difference, all would be well.

It was true that, so far, his propaganda had had no sort of effect, but he still hoped.

Now he was confronted with an entirely new aspect of the whole business, an aspect in which he, himself, figured, it seemed, as an Orpinite, inasmuch as Abby the man, and Abby's view of Art and life were to Tristram—he admitted it to himself with a determined effort of generosity—as little comprehensible as Brenda and her views were to the vicarage and the village. And with the inclusion of that supposition his earlier absolutes were shown to be merely relatives after all ; unless

—and his chin took an even more resolute line than usual, as he pondered the new contingent—unless he could bring himself to understand—which meant he supposed to sympathise with—all that was Abby.

“It’s the very devil, all this,” Tristram said; but he could find no flaw in his own reasoning, however diabolical the deduction might be.

He was so quiet during the progress of dinner that night, that Brenda, whose intuitions were far less sure with her husband than they were with Abby, decided that she had better make him talk.

“Poor darling,” she said, as they got up from the table, “I’m afraid you’ve been thinking again. Suppose we have our coffee on the terrace and you tell me all about it? I may be able to help.”

“Good,” Tristram agreed with enthusiasm. “The fact is, old girl, that I’m up against another tangle at the moment, and I hardly know which end to pull?”

“Which is?” she prompted him, as they came out on to the terrace.

“Briefly this,” he said. “I’ve got to understand Abby’s views of life and Art—understand them fully and—and comprehendingly.”

Brenda whistled on two soft, low notes of surprise. She whistled very prettily.

“Don’t see why not,” he protested. “You understand them. Why shouldn’t I?”

“Not with my intelligence, I don’t,” she said, and then, as Tristram found no immediate answer to this, she went on: “You see, darling, it’s odd,

and I can't explain it, but I understand Abby better than any man I've ever met. I know what he's thinking and what he's going to say—not the words, but the sense of it—and when he doesn't say what I expect, I know that he's trying to hide something from me. In some way, we speak each other's language."

There was silence for a long ten seconds, before Tristram said in a solemn voice: "Does that mean that you and he are 'elective affinities' or whatever Goethe called it?"

"Goodness me, no!" Brenda ejaculated. "Nothing so obvious."

"Well, what does it mean, old girl?" Tristram persisted. "Does it mean, for instance, that you are, in any sort of way . . . well . . . in love with him?"

They had come to the far end of the terrace, and Brenda leaned her elbows on the broad stone parapet and looked down over the gardens towards the little stream at the foot of the hill. The daylight was falling, the sun had set, the shadows were gathering under the trees, and in every ambush of hedge and shrubbery. But the farther slope beyond the valley was still shining with a wan clearness, a dream landscape of magical distances and unreal detail.

"Physically—no," she said, after a long pause. "Absolutely no. Get that quite definitely, Tristram. It isn't only that there's no kind of temptation. It's more than that. I couldn't; not to save his soul or his Art. No, not even if there wasn't you—and

the children. And he knows that. He has always known it. He knows it so well that he'd never ask. But, from your point of view, our point of view if you like, he's utterly and absolutely selfish. He'd sacrifice you and every one else without a scruple, of course. But he would also have sacrificed me if he could. He'd be content, as things are at present, with, shall I say, a spiritual union ; in which my sole part would be to feed and encourage his genius. And there was a moment, just one, when it seemed to me that that was the greatest and most glorious thing I could do. However, we've been into that already.

" Well, have I answered your question ? No, not quite. You asked me if I was *in any way* in love with him. Well, perhaps, I am, spiritually ; but you see, dear old man, that isn't what the world calls 'love' at all. Are you satisfied ? "

" I'm not quite sure," Tristram said thoughtfully. " It seems to me that this is another of the things I have got, somehow or other, to understand."

" It comes into the same category as Abby's views of life and art, I suppose ? " she put in.

" Probably," he agreed.

" And you want me to teach you the elementary principles ? "

" If you will, dear," he said gently.

The shadows in the garden were deepening, and rising breast-high above the borders and the box hedge ; and the distant slope of the hill across the valley was vanishing into the night.

Brenda, still leaning over the parapet, and without

other movement, silently held out her hand to him ; and when he had taken it, drew him to her, so that they stood close together, side by side, looking out into the dusk.

" If I'm to teach you anything, darling," she said in a low, clear voice, " I must begin by trying to make you see the likeness in things and people ; where you, with your categories and quantities, are so apt to look for the differences. This evening, for instance, you want to understand Abby's theory of Art and my feeling for him, as if they were problems to be tackled and understood like—what would you call it—a new formula ? And, darling, it isn't possible to understand them that way, as if they were things outside yourself that could be studied and committed to memory. You have to find the meaning of them within yourself. If it isn't there, you can never know it."

" Yes, I can see—I mean I can *feel* that, dear," Tristram said. " Go on."

She leaned her shoulder more warmly against him, though she still did not turn her head, as she continued,—

" I like your change of word, darling. It's important. Sight is such a deceptive faculty, and as Abby says, no two people can see the same thing."

" Perfectly true, of course—in a physical as well as in an intellectual sense," Tristram put in.

" Yes. I got a sense of comfort out of that in what you told me about relativity," Brenda replied. " But if we don't actually see the same things, we

can communicate with each other by recognising the likenesses between what we see and what the other person sees. You and I, for instance, at the present moment, are looking at the same view, aren't we? But the differences in what we see must be simply tremendous. In the first place, you have longer sight than I have, but that's nothing compared to the difference of emotion we bring to our outlook. You've known this view since you were a child. It must be full of childish associations for you; and—am I right, darling?—you quite likely look for particular details, certain fields, perhaps, or houses that you know intimately, over there?"

"Perfectly right," Tristram acknowledged. "The first thing I see when I look across the valley is old Partridge's farm, a bit to the right there, though it's almost too dark for you to see the house now, unless you know it as well as I do. I remember my father pointing it out to me from here, when I was about seven or eight years old, about thirty years ago, in fact, and telling me that Partridge, who wasn't much over forty then, was the best tenant he had ever had. He's still our best in some ways, although he's the most pig-headed old blighter that ever walked. However, all that's by the way."

"Not in the least," Brenda said. "It's a beautiful instance, and now I'll give you my first reaction, which was in June, 1913. But perhaps you remember it?"

"My Lord!" murmured Tristram, as if he were

slightly ashamed of himself, and then: "You know, old girl, it's sometimes a bit hard for me to say these things, and I dare say I'm rather liable to take 'em for granted, but I do realise how absolutely wonderful you are, and—and you're far more wonderful to me now than you were when we stood here together for the first time, the evening we came back from our honeymoon. You know, don't you, B, that you're just everything to me, sweetheart and wife and a good deal more than that?"

She turned to him then, and gave herself into his arms, and he held her there with not less rapture than he had held her ten years before; yet with a sense of shame that he had forgotten, for a moment, what she had so clearly and perhaps longingly remembered.

"It's nothing, darling," she said, knowing his mind very surely on this occasion. "It's nothing—just the difference between a man and a woman. And we won't bother about that, because what we are looking for, to-night, is the likeness between things."

He could still see her face, in the long twilight of the clear August evening, and he smiled at her as he replied: "Though, all the same, darling, I do want to mark certain differences, too. The difference in your feeling for me and your feeling for Abby, for example."

Her face reflected his smile, but in her tone there was the least suggestion of banter, as she said. "I'll grant you that, if you like, as—as the chief factor of the proposition. Is that right? But only

because it's something you've got to get in its right proportion presently. But . . . yes, darling, it's true, quite true that there is what seems to us an immense difference in the fact that Abby repels me, physically ; and you attract me. I've always been quite frank with you about it, haven't I ? ”

“ In a way that the Orpins, I suppose, would consider to be nothing less than shameful,” he said. “ Which seems to mark another difference.”

She released herself from him and stood for a moment looking out into the darkness, before she answered : “ We haven't come to your lesson yet. My fault, but I suddenly felt that I must love you. Darling, I do wish we could have a son, don't you ? ”

“ For some things,” Tristram said, after a marked hesitation.

There had been a miscarriage between the births of Elise and Mary ; and Mary, although she appeared to be physically stronger, if less vital, than Elise, had been born in that state which is indistinguishable from death, and had been quickened into life by artificial respiration and massage of the heart, ten minutes after her first appearance in the world. Tristram, at one time, had always spoken of her as “ the miracle.”

“ I've got an intuition that it would be all right now,” Brenda continued. “ Will you trust my intuition ? ”

“ I'm so damnably afraid of losing you,” he said.

“ But I tell you that you won't,” she returned

with a laugh. "I feel it all over me. And then, there's another thing. I've just made a failure. I've tried for something, a kind of mystical something in my attempt to save Abby, and I've failed to realise it. Now I must have some other outlet ; and I know, to-night, that it is a desire for a son. It shall be my excuse for going on living. I—I can't stand quite still, you see, darling. I want to go on discovering myself. I want new worlds to conquer, the need for new efforts and attainments."

"Against my better judgment," Tristram began, but she interrupted him.

"Now," she said. "Your judgment against my intuition. I challenge you. . . ."

"My Lord," he remarked a few minutes later. "When I think of your father and mother, you're more of a mystery than ever. Where do you get it from ?"

"Oh ! don't you know that ?" she said. "From father's mother and his sister, the one that died. Wonderful women both of them, however unknown to fame. And then there was good, solid stock behind my mother, if it wasn't quite gentle. Oh ! the Mendelians could account for me all right."

Tristram's lesson was postponed for the time being, after the great adventure of that conversation. When they had glanced at and silently rejected the cold coffee which the tactful butler had left on a little table by the hall-door, they went into what they called the music-room, because it contained the best piano, and Brenda began to play. She had some talent and had been well

trained, and Tristram, who had an ear and a natural-sense of musical values, could always listen to her with pleasure. To-night, however, she did not give him his favourite Bach, but some modern stuff which he confessed that he did not quite understand.

"It's Ravel," she told him. "Difficult, and I haven't got it quite right yet. But I'm not in the mood for the classics. One isn't when one has just got married. And dear Giles left the coffee by the hall-door, so as not to intrude on our honeymoon. I don't fancy, somehow, that Giles suspects me of an intrigue with Abby."

After that they talked of themselves; and indeed for some time to come, although they saw Abby every day, they talked of little else.

It was good, as Brenda said, to lose yourself, now and again.

2

To Tristram, it was so good that he first postponed, to Brenda's great relief, his scheme of converting the village; and then, as no fresh reminder came of the gossip beyond the park gates, ceased to worry his head about it. He was awake as he had never been before to new values in his relations with Brenda, and hence with the world at large. His "thinking," so he congratulated himself, had so far been eminently successful.

He was awakened to a consciousness that he had,

so far, touched but the remotest fringe, even of his own personal problem, by the reception of an unusual letter one morning at breakfast.

"Good God," was his first comment, made with a fierceness that caused Brenda to look up with a touch of alarm.

"My dear, what has He been doing now?" she asked.

"But this is the very devil," Tristram continued, ignoring her question, "the very devil."

"Well, one of them appears to have been writing to you, dear," Brenda remarked. "But wouldn't it be as well to show me the letter?"

Tristram picked it up, hesitated, and then rose from the table and went over to her. "It's that filthiest of all things, an anonymous letter," he said, "and vile of its kind. But you'd better read it. It concerns us both."

The letter must have been the work of many patient hours, for it was built up of words, or, in several places, of single letters, cut apparently from a book or a magazine, and pasted on a plain sheet of cheap notepaper. The substance of it was as follows :—

"DEAR SIR,—How long will you condone the adultery of your wife. Do you not understand that by so doing you are equally guilty with her. If you fear and honour God you will instantly punish her by casting her abominable lover out of the parish and by attempting to bring home to her a sense of her own disgusting wickedness. Be warned

that if you do not do this yourself, others will have to do it for you."

Brenda laid the letter thoughtfully beside her plate, and looked up at Tristram, who was angrily pacing the length of the room.

"Well?" he said. "What are we going to do about it?"

"Have you got the envelope?" she asked

"Of course. What an ass I am," Tristram said, and set himself to find it among the pile he had made of other envelopes and circulars. The envelope, however, when it had been found, gave them little help. It was addressed in an unknown, feminine handwriting, and the postmark was London, W. II.

"This pasting-on of words and letters is a splendid disguise," Brenda remarked thoughtfully, "because it must mean such a lot of consideration. The paster isn't tempted into giving herself away as she would be if she were just writing a letter."

Tristram, who was still too angry to be reasonable, and had returned to his pacing, nodded impatiently. "Yes, but what are we going to do about it?" he asked. "We must do something pretty drastic."

"Isn't there a little detective work to come first," Brenda returned. "We can't be drastic with the whole of London, W. II, you know. What district is it, by the way?"

"Notting Hill and round about there," Tristram said. Since the change in the denomination of the London postal districts, he had always scrupulously

used the new figures, and he had the kind of mind that remembers information of this sort.

Brenda pursed her lips. "But it was written by some one who lives in Zeal-Afford," she commented.

"I suppose one can be quite sure of that?" Tristram agreed, beginning now to take an interest in Brenda's inferences.

"Certain," she said. "In the first place, no one outside knows or cares enough to bother. But there are better grounds than that—just one dangerous word that gives it away. She says 'the parish.' An outsider wouldn't have said that, would they? Doesn't it imply a kind of personal interest in the place?"

"Yes; that's pretty sound, old girl," Tristram said. "Very sound, I think. We'll assume that it was done here and taken to London to be posted."

"Taken, or sent in another envelope," she corrected him, "to be *addressed* and posted."

"Good again," Tristram said. "Now who is there who could have done it? The Orpins? It's got a distinctly biblical style: 'honour God,' 'casting her abominable lover out,' 'a sense of her wickedness'; things like that. Don't you think?"

Brenda shook her head. "It isn't like them," she argued. "They wouldn't stoop to a thing of this sort. Why should they? But, besides that, they wouldn't take the trouble, they wouldn't have the time. This, dear, has been done by some one—

I can feel it—who has a lot of time to spare ; not only to compose and paste up this letter, but also to take an overwhelming interest in other people's affairs. In fact, I haven't, in my own mind, the least doubt as to the author of it."

" Good Lord ! Who ? " Tristram asked.

" You can't guess ? " she replied. " An educated person, with strong religious tendencies, who lives alone in this parish ? "

" What ? Old Priestley ? " Tristram exclaimed. " But surely . . . I know she's an exasperating old fool, always looking out for an imaginary insult to make a grievance of, but surely she's too decent an old body, too respectable, to do a thing like that ? "

" One would certainly have thought so," Brenda replied sadly. " But she lived in Notting Hill before her husband died. She has probably got friends there still. And—and—I'm afraid in this one instance, dear, that my poor little intelligence insists on being attended to."

" My Lord," Tristram murmured. " How queer people are ! It gives me a shock, this, B. Another shock, of a rather different kind. It is, it must be, a kind of madness ; don't you think ? "

" That's the easiest explanation, of course," Brenda said.

" Have you any other ? "

" I don't want any other, if you'll tell me what you mean by being mad," Brenda said.

" Isn't it," he tried " a failure to adapt oneself to the common standards ; an inability to realise

the accepted laws of physical and moral well-being ; an inability to—to adjust oneself, in short, to the common usage. Why are you smiling ? ”

“ I was just thinking,” Brenda said, “ how nicely your definition would apply to me from the point of view of Mrs. Orpin or Mrs. Priestley.”

“ M’yes ; I suppose it would,” Tristram admitted reluctantly, and then added : “ But you *could* adjust yourself, if you wanted to, B. The insane have lost the power to do that. Doesn’t that mark a difference ? ”

“ Is it a difference ? ” Brenda replied “ If it is, it’s only one of degree, not of kind. And is it the power to adjust oneself that is lost, Tristram, or only the wish ? ”

“ You know, you’ve got a mighty subtle mind, old girl,” Tristram said.

“ I haven’t,” she returned. “ It’s just that I *see* these things as you see your mathematical problems. I may be absolutely wrong about them all—I can’t possibly tell if I am or not—but I feel them like that.”

Tristram resumed his pacing of the room, but this time slowly and thoughtfully. “ But on a question of practice,” he began, after a minute or two. “ Suppose our would-be anonymous friend continues her correspondence, suppose she takes to postcards, suppose she talks scandal in the village—are we to take no steps to stop her ? ”

“ How ? ” Brenda asked.

“ Threaten her with a libel action ? ” Tristram suggested.

“ Oh ! I don’t know,” Brenda said, with a sudden

gust of impatience, and then added : " Can she do us any real harm ? Does it, after all, matter what she does or says ? In any case, she's no worse than the Orpins. They've got just the same passion for interfering with other people's affairs ; and with less excuse, because, however difficult it may be for us to understand Mrs. Priestley, she is, I don't doubt, immensely, terribly in earnest. She hasn't got the moral courage to attack me openly, but she does honestly think that I ought to be whipped at the cart-tail."

" Tell you what," Tristram suggested. " We've got to ask the old girl to the tenants' garden-party. I'll go down and see her and try to pump her a bit. Oh ! and, I say, keep that letter as a curiosity. Put it in a safe place somewhere."

3

If Tristram had needed further confirmation of the accuracy of Brenda's deductions with regard to the authorship of the abominable letter, he could have found it in Mrs. Priestley's manner.

Miss Latimer opened the door to him herself, and a trifle overwhelmed by the importance of a visit from so influential a person as her landlord, never paused to consult her boarder's wishes, but ushered him obsequiously straight into the sacred sitting-room.

" Here's Mr. Wing come to see you, Mrs. Priestley," she announced, in the tone of one who brings good news.

And there could be no possible doubt that Mrs. Priestley was scared. Her lips began to tremble, and she mouthed to keep them still, alternately pinching and pursing them; while her eyes, hesitating between a forced boldness and a very genuine dismay, flickered from challenge to the desperate uneasiness of the suspected criminal.

Tristram was so genuinely sorry for her that all his resentment died out and his only thought, at the moment, was to relieve her embarrassment.

"Oh, Mrs. Priestley, so sorry to have broken in on you like this," he said gently; "but I happened to be passing and thought I would just look in and tell you that we hope to see you at the garden-party up at the Hall next month."

Mrs. Priestley, who had made a tentative and incomplete effort to rise from her chair, sank back again and closed her eyes. "Miss Latimer," she said in a weak, panting voice, "ought to have warned me. My heart. Quite a shock."

"I say, I'm dreadfully sorry," Tristram soothed her. "Perhaps, if you keep quite still for a minute or two——?"

Mrs. Priestley opened her eyes and almost instantly closed them again, but in that moment Tristram, who was watching her with real anxiety, had time to see that her glance no longer wavered between desperation and fear, but had taken on an expression that was faintly malignant.

"Perhaps you'd sooner——" he began, but she put up her hand to stop him.

"No, no! As you're here, Mr. Wing," she said,

"I think you might as well know that I shall not be attending the garden-party this year." Her eyes were still closed; it may have been to give her courage.

Tristram stiffened. He was no longer sorry for her. "Oh! Why not?" he asked curtly, and at the sound of his voice Mrs. Priestley closed her eyes very tightly indeed, almost as if she winced before the threat of a blow.

"I'm sorry to say that I cannot approve, simply cannot approve of—of Mrs. Wing's conduct," she said, with all the resolution she could muster. "That man at the cottage, for example—after all the stories we've heard about him—so much wiser, to put it at its lowest, if he were sent away."

"Ah! well, I think that's a matter for me to decide, Mrs. Priestley," Tristram said; "and I can't help feeling that, so far as you are concerned, it would be wiser not to interfere in our affairs. However, you are, of course, quite at liberty to absent yourself from the garden-party. I'm sorry that I startled you. Good-bye."

He was, just then, so annoyed and disgusted, he told Brenda, that he was afraid to trust himself any longer in the room with her. "I had it on the tip of my tongue," he said, "to warn her that I should take action if she sent us any more anonymous letters."

Brenda smiled. "And you're no nearer, I take it, to understanding her point of view," she remarked.

"I understood one thing, old girl," he said: "that it seems to me we overlooked this morning,

and that is that the old lady was scared when I first went in. She was ashamed, conscious of having done wrong. She knows with one side of her that she is doing *wrong* according to common standards of good behaviour; and that same side of her, probably, doesn't wish to do things like the writing of filthy, anonymous letters. Well, I put it to you, B, that one is justified in calling her mad—and you sane—because she is driven to do something that is contrary to her normal desire by a force of some kind that is, intermittently, stronger than herself. It's what they used to call 'possession,' and it seems to me a jolly good name for it. Don't you admit that?"

"Yes," Brenda said; "but I still think that the difference is one only of degree. Weren't you nearly driven to do something contrary to your normal desire, something that you'd have been ashamed of afterwards, when you were tempted to threaten Mrs. Priestley this morning? If you'd gone one little step farther, as you very well might have done, would you have been, just for that instant, insane? There are endless degrees, my dear, I've admitted that. I want you to recognise the likenesses, that's all."

4

This eventful day that for Tristram was associated with the reception of the abominable letter and his interview with Mrs. Priestley was, also, the day

on which Abby began his picture of the little river and the pool. The first picture, which he referred to with a rather tender contempt as the photograph, he had signed "G.K.," and given to Brenda to do what she liked with.

"It's muck," he had said. "The thing itself now it's done is just a spoilt canvas. But it has taught me something. I know, now, what people mean by work; and I see that it may have its uses, now and again. These new experiences are damned interesting—for a day or two. Anyway, this thing has made me think, and to-morrow I'm going to brood. I won't promise, m' dear lady, but something might come of it."

And for some days after that he had brooded, wandering about the park and even going down into the village, avoiding apparently only one spot in the Wing domain, namely, the bridge between the gardens and the Home Farm with its view of the river and the pool. On three separate occasions, however, he had gone up to the Hall, asked to have another look at his "photograph," had glanced at it thoughtfully for a moment, and had then gone away again.

But that morning, soon after eleven, he began to work in his studio. Brenda had come up to see him while Tristram was interviewing Mrs. Priestley, and had been told rather impatiently that he didn't want to be disturbed. In the afternoon he had set up his easel again on the bridge and had sent a message, by Elise, that he would much rather that no one came anywhere near him.

She had delivered it when she, Mary, and Miss Ingleby came out to tea, which, "for a treat," the children were having with their father and mother on the lawn that afternoon.

"I think he was trying hard not to be rude," Elise reported, "but he said would we please go right away, and would I tell every one else that he didn't want to be looked at. I've told Hull and Giles, and of course Miss Ingleby, and Mary heard him say it, and now I've told you. Who else ought I to tell, do you think?"

"What an obedient and literal child it is," Tristram murmured, and added more audibly, "You might tell Mrs. Priestley."

"Why her, specially, daddy?" Elise asked, instantly guessing at some recondite allusion in her father's suggestion.

"Daddy was joking," Brenda explained.

"I know. I guessed that," Elise replied. "I want to know why it was a joke."

"Mrs. Priestley doesn't like Mr. Abby," Brenda said. "She wants him to go away."

"So do I," put in Mary, who had appeared to be entirely absorbed by the prospect of the cake she would presently earn by being diligent with her bread-and-butter.

"Why, dear?" asked Miss Ingleby, conscientiously pursuing the principle of encouraging the children to speak their minds about everything.

"He's silly," Mary replied, with her mouth full.

"You know," Elise added thoughtfully, "I see what Mary means, don't you, mother? Mr. Abby

is awfully funny in some ways, and his fingers are all brown, at least the ones he smokes with are."

"Yes, dear; people aren't all alike in little things," Brenda said. "It's better they shouldn't be."

"Is not washing your hands one of the little things, mummy," Elise inquired; "'cause you always want us to."

"Pretty fundamental, this, B," Tristram commented under his breath.

"They notice everything so," was Miss Ingleby's aside.

Every one, except Mary, who had earned her cake by this time, was looking at Brenda.

"It's like this, dear," she asked. "Your father and I happen to like being clean, and we want you to like it, too. But that isn't a reason why everybody should; and it isn't a reason for disliking people who don't keep their hands clean. You like Hull, don't you? And his hands are sometimes very dirty."

Elise seemed willing to accept this, but Mary came in again with "Hull's a dardener."

"And Mr. Abby is a painter, dear," Miss Ingleby tried hopefully.

"Don't like painters, then," Mary said. "Don't like what they smells of. Don't like how they look at me, 's if I was a crawley frog. Please, Miss Ingleby, may I have some more cake."

"What do you think, Elise?" Tristram asked.

"Well, he does rather look at you as if he wishes you weren't there," she said, with an air of picking

her way carefully between truth and politeness. "I—I don't think I like him much either, daddy."

"We don't ask you to like him, if you don't want to, dear," Brenda put in.

"He's always very polite, of course," Elise said, still, apparently, searching for some saving grace. "I don't, you know, mummy, really *dislike* him—only his fingers. You like him lots, don't you, mummy?"

Brenda nodded, without too much emphasis.

"And do you, daddy?" Elise continued.

"I'm sure he's very, very clever," Tristram said, and knew from his daughter's acceptance of this statement that he and she understood one another. Their eyes had met as he had spoken, and a silent confidence had been exchanged.

"He's a crawley frog," Mary said, by way of winding up the subject. "Don't like crawley frogs. Runned away from one yestiddy. He tried to catch me but he couldn't."

"She means a toad, you know, mummy," Elise explained. "But, of course, it didn't try to catch her."

"Did! did!" Mary asseverated. "All round the park, and I runned and runned right away from him."

"You didn't. You made it all up," Elise protested.

Mary smiled complacently. "And at last I climbed up a high tree, the highest there is," she concluded triumphantly.

"Oh, Mary!" her mother gently reproved her. "That's a very nice story, but you needn't pretend that it really happened."

Mary looked sly. "He was a most 'normous frog," she said; "bigger'n daddy."

Brenda smiled and shrugged her shoulders, but Elise could not let that last statement go by unchecked. "There aren't any toads as big as that, are there, mummy?" she protested passionately. "There couldn't be, possibly, could there?"

"No, dear; but don't get excited about it," Brenda soothed her. "Mary knows quite well that we don't believe it really happened. She's only teasing us. Aren't you, Mary?"

Mary pouted her rather full underlip, but made no reply.

Tristram held out his hand to her, and after Miss Ingleby had hastily wiped her, she went over to him, and he lifted her on to his knee.

"Any more pretty stories?" he asked, and was greatly concerned when she suddenly hid her face in his coat and burst into tears.

Neither Brenda nor Miss Ingleby showed any surprise. "She's like that, Mr. Wing," the latter explained. "She's always sorry afterwards;" and it was only Tristram who was able to distinguish the feebly indignant "Not" from the other noises that Mary was making.

"Extraordinary differences between those two," Tristram remarked, when Mary, completely recovered, had gone off to play with her sister on the farther side of the lawn.

"Quite extraordinary," Miss Ingleby agreed, "though there are queer likenesses, too."

"Such as?" Tristram suggested; but Miss Ingleby who, in this particular, was more sure of her theory than of her practice, was unable to provide an instance on the spur of the moment, and Brenda, finding herself appealed to, said:

"It's only a difference of expression, isn't it, Tristram? Children's reactions are so rapid and so vivid that they seem exaggerated to us."

"I grant you all that, B," Tristram replied; "but what about these likenesses. I'm quite ready to admit them, but I'd like to know."

Brenda threw away the cigarette she had been smoking, and leaned forward. "The first thing and one of the most important, in the children and in us," she said, "is the continual tendency to split into two or more personalities, and the more one insists on what one considers important habits, the more marked it is. You heard them about washing, just now. I don't think that's important, but Elise gave us a nice instance of contradiction. At one and the same time, she was professing disgust for Abby's cigarette stains and seeking an excuse for not washing herself. That's only an example of the way it works in an unimportant thing; but what is much more impressive is the way it works when the thing really is important, like telling the truth. I've always tried, myself, to tell them the truth as nearly as I can, and they know it and realise that it means a lot to me, and now, dear, we come to the likeness between

them, because their reactions in this are pretty much the same, though they choose different modes of expression. Elise's form of release from the bother of having to tell the truth is in hiding things. It's a kind of lying, and is a relief to her, in some way. And Mary never fails to tell tales about Elise's hiding of things, which produces in her a desire to protest. But she, herself, lies by telling stories like the one you heard just now, which arouses the same desire to protest in Elise. The reaction is the same, when you recognise what it derives from. It's only the expression that's different."

"Pretty good that, B," Tristram commented softly. "I've still hopes of solving the monkey-puzzle. All you've been saying fits in, rather."

In his own mind he was applying Brenda's theory of the reactions of Elise and Mary to the writing of the abominable letter, but he refrained from quoting the example in Miss Ingleby's presence. She might in a moment of expansion confide the story to Mrs. Jeffery, the housekeeper, who might confide it to Giles the butler, and so the scandal would go slipping down from step to step until it was—well, all over the place. And there were, surely, some truths that were better kept to oneself.

As to the anonymous letter, he proposed to take no further steps. If the poor old thing was not mad enough to be put in an asylum, she was mad enough to be forgiven. And she had had a shock. The chances were that she wouldn't do it again.

VII

DECORATIONS

I

THE drought still held ; the harvest was all in ; the harvest-festival had been fixed for the unusually early date of the 8th of September ; and already, ten days ahead, the great business of the church-decoration was in hand.

The Orpins were, in some ways, old-fashioned people. They had not, for example, been affected by the modern growth of ritualism. For them, the handsome church of Zeal-Afford, with its fine nave arcades, its well-raised chancel, and its five-light East window was a building in which the vicar held his services ; three every Sunday, Holy Communion after Mattins once a month, and appropriately on Festivals. It was not to them, what it would have been to the ritualist, a place consecrated and holy to be entered and used only with reverence, a temple that must be profaned by no associations other than that of worship.

The decorators for Christmas, Easter, and the Harvest Festival used the church freely as a workshop. They sat there, some of them, to make the wreaths that were hung in great "swags" between the capitals of the columns in the nave

arcade ; wreaths that were begun very industriously, " nice and bunchy " as Mrs. Orpin liked them, but were apt to thin out in progress as the industry, or the material, became exhausted. At Christmas you could do so much with yew and ivy, using occasional bunches of holly to give them the right feeling, but this year there was so little that was appropriate for wreaths, with no touch of autumn in the foliage, and not a sprig, as yet, of " old man's beard."

The first hour or so of work on these occasions was always conducted decorously and almost in silence. The " Sunday-feeling " met the workers as they came out of the hot sun into the subdued light, the faint chill, the suspicion of damp and mouldiness that smelt of age-old stone with a suggestion of age-old bones ; all of which was so strongly associated with the necessity for self-restraint and the putting-on of the unfamiliar garment of reverence. But by unmarked degrees that sense of awe and enforced sanctity passed away. If Miss Latimer was resoundingly hammering tacks into the pulpit, it was little use to ask Emily, three pews ahead, for the scissors, in a hushed whisper. And by the second or third day, the church ceased to be a place of worship and became a workshop in which you had no hesitation in calling blithely to Emily from one aisle to another, to ask her where she had put that ball of string to, now.

Emily was the younger of the two Porter girls to whom Mrs. Orpin always entrusted the making of the wreaths. They had underlings who worked

to their instructions, but it was the principals who were responsible for the final effect ; and it was a matter for heart-burning, half-suppressed resentment, and much secret whispering between them, when they learnt that this year Mrs. Priestley had resigned pulpit, font, lectern, and communion rails in order to take over the wreaths.

It is true that the Porter girls, Gertrude and Emily, were not natives of Zeal-Afford. They had been educated in Exeter and had come to the village with their mother and their savings when their father had died, as they had been unable to continue the small plumber's business which had hitherto been their means of livelihood. Mrs. Porter took in washing ; a little, crumpled woman, but so adept in the use of the smoothing-iron that she washed even for the Hall. And Gertrude and Emily helped. They were great helpers, and, according to Mrs. Orpin, nice respectable girls. Gertrude at twenty-nine, plain, wide-mouthed, and obviously designed for spinsterhood ; Emily, better-looking, but with a touch of sharpness, and, at twenty-seven, still apparently unsought.

But if they were, strictly speaking, " foreigners," they had established a precedent by doing the wreaths for seven years, and for the first day of their new subordinacy their speech was almost entirely confined to a low hissing. It may have been due to their Exeter school training, that their sibilants were so marked. Tristram had declared that from the Hall pew in the north aisle you could not miss a single " s " among all the responses and

hymns of the church service. It was certainly true that they seemed to hiss rather egregiously that first morning, but as their conversation was almost entirely confined to, "No, Mrs. Priestley," and, "Yes, Mrs. Priestley," they need not, perhaps, be blamed for that.

And it was only the first day that the hissing of the Porter girls was so noticeable. One reason, no doubt, was that according to custom, the church became steadily noisier as the work progressed. Another that their attention was so deeply engaged in listening, that speech was unnecessary. For just as they were great helpers, the Porter girls were, also, great listeners. And never had they had more interesting material to hold their interest.

Mrs. Priestley had been brooding again, had been having, indeed, the worst attack Miss Latimer had ever known. All the adventures, encounters, and stimulations of the last three weeks were coming to a head in her consciousness, shaping themselves definitely into what seemed to Mrs. Priestley herself a coherent and reasonable structure, springing from the indisputable root-fact that she had been neglected and insulted.

"Mr. Wing is a gentleman—no one could deny that—but he has allowed himself to be deceived by his wife," she had begun, quite irrelevantly, on the second morning; and Gertrude and Emily had immediately pricked their ears, and soothingly hissed an encouraging, "Yes, Mrs. Priestley."

Mrs. Priestley's hands had fallen into her lap—wreath-making was not her *métier*, and the yard

or so she had done the day before had shocked the accomplished Porters. Now she apparently meant to substitute talk for work, an agreeable exchange in view of the fact that all her work would probably have to be done again, although the Porters gave her no credit for the substitution when they retailed the story to the village. "A lot of help she was, to be sure. She never put her hand to a thing," was Emily's report, given in that thin, wry voice of hers. But, at the time, they encouraged her.

After that, Mrs. Priestley worked off quite a lot of personal confidences about the way she had been insulted and injured. She had reached the point at which she usually boiled over on to Miss Latimer. But the Porter girls really served her purpose better. They did not interrupt her with futile attempts at consolation and tell her they were sure she'd best not worry her head too much about it.

And the Porters, bending over their work, deftly and rapidly spinning out wreaths as if they spun the strands of a gigantic web that was presently to entangle some, as yet, unsuspecting quarry, now and again exchanged sly covert glances that pitied the foolishness of Mrs. Priestley's obsession, but agreed to encourage her for the sake of the interesting material that they guessed might follow. Even from the beginning there was a hint of that drop of scandal coming to stain this innocuous liquid of self-revelation; and soon the flow was stained to a full, rich red that made Mrs. Priestley's hearers dip still lower over their work to hide their blushes and their delighted giggles.

Something there must have been in the old lady's mind or spirit that was just then clutching blindly at an excuse, and she found it in her definite persuasion of the sin of Brenda and Abby. And, preserving through all her mental wanderings a reasonable awareness of the quality of her listeners, she showed a marked tendency to concentrate more particularly upon the latter. Mrs. Wing was not so susceptible to attack. She had lived in the parish too long to be denounced as the type of the Scarlet Woman. But this "low artist" was a creature of whom one could believe anything. The Porter girls, themselves, would not be safe with him. Mrs. Priestley did not use the phrase, but she conveyed clearly enough that to be a low artist was equivalent to being a "professional seducer."

It was, indeed, a singularly satisfying theme to the inventor of it. The more she embroidered it, the more certain was she that she had been completely justified in all that she had said or done; and that she was, at this moment, engaged in the scrupulously righteous work of warning two innocent and right-minded young women against the danger that awaited them. From being a mere critic, however bitter, of the Great Sin (the love of one human being for another to whom he or she is not married, a horrible suspicious circumstance even when the lovers are of the same sex), she became, for the time, an impassioned propagandist, and there is no surer method of confirming us in our own beliefs; which is perhaps what propaganda is for.

Mrs. Priestley went home that evening relieved and satisfied, ready to be friendly with Miss Latimer, and content to take no further steps, for the time being, in the great scandal. It was as if she had lanced some abscess in herself and was safe for some weeks from the fret and pain of it. And by the time it re-formed, many things had happened.

Miss Latimer, with the skill of long experience, gratefully recognised the symptoms when her lodger came in at half-past four.

"There, now; I declare it's done you good getting out for a bit," she exclaimed warmly.

"Perhaps it has, my dear," Mrs. Priestley agreed in her kindest tone; "but I'm dying for my tea."

"Ah, well, *that* won't take long," Miss Latimer returned cheerfully, "seeing that there's nothing to be done but just to wet it. Shall you just take your bonnet and cloak off while I see to it?"

And over tea, steering a delicate course among the shoals of her lodger's dislikes, Miss Latimer realised that, for a time at least, the subject of the Wing scandal was too painful to be mentioned. The abscess was temporarily relieved, but it must not be touched until it had healed over.

The next day, Mrs. Priestley stayed in bed and sent a polite, friendly note to Mrs. Orpin explaining that she had caught a slight chill in the Church the day before, and would most unfortunately be prevented, she was afraid, from participating further in the work of the decorations, though she believed, so far as the wreaths were concerned, that everything could safely be left to the care of

those nice respectable Porters, who had seemed, as far as she could judge, to be thoroughly competent.

Mrs. Orpin's reply expressed her sympathy, but not the thankfulness she felt at the prospect of getting through the harvest decorations without a fuss.

2

The youth of Zeal-Afford was rather "at a loose-end" at the beginning of September that year. The drought and the early harvest had combined to leave one of those rare intervals in which, beyond the ordinary routine of stock-tending and the dairy, there is an almost complete absence of farm work. The squire, for some reason best known to himself, had no house-party this year for "the first," and seemed, most unaccountably, to be doing little shooting himself, although there were plenty of birds and every field was clear. The farmers, what with the earlier poorness of the hay, the present trouble of short straw, and the prospect of a complete failure of the root-crop, were more than ever inclined to grumble themselves into a mood of discontent and depression; and the village generally, partly through idleness and partly through the influence of the weather, was about as near "a fit of nerves" as a village can be.

Now, a common symptom of this condition is an eagerness to find a Jonah, a scape-goat; to blame something or somebody for the ills which we are

unable or unwilling to alleviate by taking thought, and to sacrifice it or him in the hopes of placating the high gods. Early man had adopted this principle many thousands of years before the institutions of Moses, and a certain superstitious respect for it still lingers even amongst the most highly civilised peoples. In individuals it is manifested in the instant desire to find another guilty of contributory negligence when they have, themselves, been careless. (Whatever it was we fell over or knocked down ought not, we are sure, to have been there, and wouldn't have been if someone had not, almost criminally, left it just in that one particularly dangerous spot.) But except in small and restricted communities, such as the company of a sailing-ship, the old group-form of laying the blame on the shoulders of a suspected Jonah and incontinently pitching him overboard, has gone out of fashion.

It probably would not have been manifested in Zeal-Afford if Gertrude and Emily Porter had not set the tale going.

They were, as everybody acknowledged, nice respectable girls,—never having had the chance, as one or two of their contemporaries spitefully said, to be anything else,—and their agency in this matter was difficult to trace. They did not, for instance, hang about the village with young men in the evening, nor mix with the young women who did. But they certainly gave their crumpled little mother a full and slightly altered story of Mrs. Priestley's revelations ; and, as certainly, let

out hints and scraps of lurid information to half a dozen other people.

And the Porters' tendency in this, was to concentrate on the unpleasantness of the "low artist,"—they had greedily sucked up Mrs. Priestley's phrase—who was living within the precincts of the Hall, and painting every day, including Sundays, on the bridge by the home farm. To them, he represented the scornful sex who had overlooked them, and they seemed to find a curious satisfaction in picturing him at once as a devil of wickedness and a creature beneath the notice of all decent people,—on the one hand a splendid threat to Zeal-Afford's virgin innocence; on the other, a thing altogether contemptible and—low.

The inhabitants of Zeal-Afford were ripe for such a story as this. They suspected all "foreigners," and Abby was of the type that justified them in those suspicions. Artists of a kind, they knew well, bluff gentlemen in rich tweeds, Norfolk jackets, knickerbockers, handsome stockings and brogues, with or without beards, inclined to affability, and to bribing small onlookers to keep away with the gifts of pennies or even threepenny-bits. But Abby was their first experience of the "low" kind that wore clothes like a tramp, that wandered aimlessly and often unshaved about the village, that smoked cheap cigarettes, instead of a bluff pipe, and that sometimes paused and regarded the natives with a look of rapt and speculative interest, as if they were for show in a case, or a cage.

It was right and natural that they should have suspected and resented him from the occasion of his first visit, even before the report of Joe Popple's midnight vigil had rationalised their instinctive repulsions, and, incidentally, put Brenda, so far as the majority of the women were concerned, into that same unacceptable class of people who were not and could never learn to be, proper Devonshire folk.

The young men saw the affair from rather a different angle. Some of them, whether they knew it or not, still cherished a secret admiration for Brenda ; others, more particularly since the scandal, had regarded her with frank desire. While Harry Beer, a black-haired, dark-eyed young man who was the acknowledged leader of the society that frequented the Afford Arms, had, on more than one occasion lately, openly made remarks about the squire's wife that were so daring and intimate as to leave his hearers at once tickled and a trifle uneasy. Most of the older men had shaken their heads and said he had gone further than was proper, but his boldness was intensely exciting, even if it made you at the same time feel slightly ashamed.

Yet it needed a more inflammable condition and the spur of a definite threat, to goad such slow and stolid youths as these into any kind of action. The first was developed by the idleness and the hot weather, the second supplied by the suggestion of the whispering Porters that the dirty foreigner was a danger to the village virgins, who in their turn were very willing to supply the evidence. At

first this was confined to recollections of having been looked at funny-like, accompanied by protestations, and histrionic shudders expressive of the peculiar dislike they had felt for such a look coming from that quarter. And then one of them, either more imaginative or having a stronger instinctive feeling for self-defence, brought in the obvious legs of Mrs. Tebbitt's pretty Alice, who was not quite thirteen.

This was the master-touch that satisfied everybody. The youths who had so often looked at girls, funny-like, themselves, and had no wish to be blamed for it, spontaneously welcomed this suggestion of real criminality. Others remembered, as soon as they were told about it, that they, too, had noticed the dirty foreigner staring at little Alice in a way that no decent person could put up with. And so the charge was instantly accepted as being true beyond all doubt, although no thought of little Alice and her legs had ever entered Abby's consciousness.

VIII

ABBY'S MASTERPIECE

I

BRENDA was not in her best mood when Abby asked to see her at the amazingly early hour of half-past nine on the morning of the fourth of September.

The day began badly. It was a Sunday, and at breakfast she suggested to Tristram the advisability of resuming their attendance at morning service.

"It is not," she said, "that I like the service or that I think any of us get any good from it, or that I want to please the Orpins, but . . ."

Mrs. Fullerton, who, with her husband, had now returned for another short visit to the Hall, calmly supplied the blank while Brenda still hesitated to state her reason without prejudice.

"But because it's the right thing to do," she said. "I quite agree and shall certainly go, myself, though your father seems to have forgotten which day of the week it is."

Mr. Fullerton squirmed with an effect of having been accidentally but very exasperatingly trodden upon. He had promised to give way about the sale of the Berkshire place, and believed that he had thereby earned a few weeks' respite from minor annoyances.

"Personally, I have not the least intention of going to church, or—or anything of the kind," he returned defiantly. "I shall have a great deal of business to think about for some time to come."

His wife glanced at him thoughtfully for an instant, and apparently decided to concede that position.

"Just as you like, Henry," she said; "you and I don't live here all the year round, I'm glad to say. But for Brenda and Tristram, who do, it is surely better to keep on good terms with his vicar."

"It isn't that, mother," Brenda put in, who had now had time to consider her statement; "it is that I don't like this kind of silent protest implied by our absence. I am not protesting. I think the Orpins have a perfect right to think as they do, and that they have been, on the whole, quite nice about it all."

Tristram looked up and shook his head. "It's no good, B," he said, "I can't go and listen to Orpin, feeling as I do about him, and I'd sooner you and Elise didn't go either."

"Passive resistance?" Brenda inquired.

"For the time being," Tristram agreed.

"And what about the Harvest Festival on Thursday?" Brenda asked. "Don't you feel that you *must* go to that? Or is the occasion to be made the opportunity for a still more marked protest?"

Mrs. Fullerton put up her glasses and turned them upon her son-in-law's puzzled face.

"Is it worth while, my dear Tristram?" she

said. "That is what you must ask yourself. And if it is, why not go the whole way, let this place, and come to live in town, which would surely be better from every point of view?"

Tristram smiled at the absurdity of that idea.

"What do you think Brenda and I could find to do in London?" he asked.

"Get to know people; the right kind of people," Mrs. Fullerton returned promptly. "You know a good many already, though you make no attempt, I notice, to keep them up. And we can introduce you to a great many more."

Tristram, still smiling, looked across at Brenda, and was shocked to find that she did not appear to be sharing his amused contempt for the question under discussion.

"Can't see us in town; what, B?" he urged her anxiously.

She shook her head. "It couldn't ever come to that," she said, though there was little assurance in her voice. "Unless, of course, you insist upon having a complete split with the Orpins. . . ."

"Even then . . ." Tristram protested.

"And the village as a whole," she added.

"But it isn't a question of a 'split,' B," he said. "I want to show them that they've been absolutely wrong from first to last, that's all."

"Is that all?" murmured Brenda with a sigh, but before he could reply to that his mother-in-law took up the theme.

"Waste of time, my dear Tristram," she said firmly. "Absolute waste of time, believe me.

It's quite impossible to teach people of that class anything. I've had experience. They *won't* learn. It isn't that they can't; it is that they *won't*. And now that you've encouraged everybody in the place to believe in the scandal by having this Mattocks person to live permanently on the estate, your only course is to get out of it, which, as I've often told you before would be best for both of you, in every way. It isn't as if you had to look at every penny as we do. You're free to choose. And down here, now more than ever, you're getting into a groove which is bad both for you and the children—a narrow, country groove, the worst of all."

Tristram frowned, and threw back his shoulders as if he felt the first intimation of a loop that was being cast about him and would snap it by physical strength.

"No, no," he said, shaking his head. "We don't feel like that about it, Brenda and I. We prefer the country, in every way. That's so, isn't it, old girl?" he concluded with a faint suggestion of pleading in his voice.

But he received no answer to that question, for while he was still speaking, Miss Ingleby had come into the room, wearing an expression of determined anxiety that was in itself sufficient apology for her intrusion.

"It's Mary," she said in answer to Brenda's quick glance of inquiry; "she's complaining of that pain again, and I thought . . ."

But Brenda was already on her feet.

"The truth is that Mary eats far too much," Mrs. Fullerton declared in a carrying voice, as her daughter left the room with Miss Ingleby.

"We're rather nervous about appendicitis," Tristram explained. "It isn't the first time she has been threatened with it."

"Naturally, you're nervous," Mrs. Fullerton said sharply; "with no medical man worth the name nearer than Exeter; and knowing, as I suppose you do, that appendicitis may become dangerous at almost any moment. Why . . ."

"I think I'll just run up and look at her, if you don't mind?" Tristram interrupted. He knew that for once his mother-in-law was right, but he was not in the mood to listen to her just then.

And on the top of all that, Abby came, demanding Brenda.

2

For once, she was inclined to deny him. When all possible allowance had been made for Mary's imaginative endowments, there still remained positive evidence that was very disquieting. She had been sick in the night, had eaten a hearty breakfast, and now felt sick again. Lastly, there was a tenderness on the right side of the stomach which no amount of suggestion could induce her to feel on the left.

Brenda frowned impatiently when the message was brought to her.

"Ask him if it's very important, Giles? Tell

him what's the matter," she said ; and there was something in Giles's manner of leaving the night-nursery that conveyed his intention of being very firm and explicit downstairs.

A new shade of anxiety was added to Brenda's expression, but she made no attempt to call him back.

" Better get Moulton to have a look at her, don't you think ? " Tristram suggested.

Brenda slightly shrugged her shoulders. " Although one knows beforehand precisely what he'll say and do," she commented.

" Want to see doctor," murmured Mary in the subdued voice that she believed to be proper to the occasion.

" She does believe in him, you see," Miss Ingleby put in.

Brenda bit her lip. She was aware of having made an error of judgment by depreciating Dr. Moulton in Mary's hearing. She remembered that in the course of the last attack, Elise had politely inquired of her sister if she were better, and Mary had replied, " Course I'm better. The doctor's been."

" Yes, we'd better have him," she said, looking at Tristram with rather a wry smile. " Will you send——"

" No, I'll go myself. It'll be quicker," he replied, and met the returning Giles on the threshold of the nursery door.

" Well ? " he demanded impatiently. Tristram, at least, was in no mood to be bothered with Abby just then.

Giles looked apologetically across the room at his mistress. "Mr. Mattocks, mam," he said, "asked me to say 'Please.' Only that, mam, he told me."

"Oh, well, I'll leave you to settle that," Tristram concluded as he went out.

"Don't go 'way, mummy; don't go till doctor comes," Mary implored in a high voice, momentarily forgetting to be utterly weak and prostrate.

And, "Surely it can't be very important," Miss Ingleby added.

Brenda had a sudden sense of Abby's complete isolation and loneliness. In some way or other, every one's hand was against him in this place. To her, only, could he look for any sympathy, appreciation, or affection. She saw him, not as demanding recognition or understanding, but as pleading to her, with a single word, for a moment's encouragement in those vast, empty places of his life, which were surrounded by a world of strangers and enemies.

"Very well, Giles," she said, "I'll be down in a minute or two."

It was intended as a message, but Giles returned to his pantry by the back stairs without revisiting the Hall. His devotion to his mistress was being severely tried by her consideration for a person whom he regarded as a kind of salvaged tramp, a person who ought to be crawling with gratitude for the least notice, instead of sending up impertinent messages.

Brenda had to turn her attention to quietening the now passionate urgencies of Mary.

"Miss Ingleby will stay with you, darling, and mummy won't be away for more than a very few minutes," was the form taken by her attempt to calm the patient. "And the doctor will be here directly, and you'll have to be properly in bed when he comes."

"Don't *want* you to go. Don't *want* you to see the ugly man with the dirty fingers," replied Mary, openly displaying just that prejudice which was least likely in her mother's present frame of mind to act as an inducement.

Brenda's patience began to give way. "But I *must* go, dear," she said, getting to her feet. "I shall be back very soon. Put her to bed, Miss Ingleby. And don't be silly, Mary. You know mummy doesn't like you to be silly."

But the picture she carried away from the night-nursery of Mary passionately rejecting Miss Ingleby's advances was not one that inclined her to spend much time in the consolation of Abby.

She found him in the library suffering the conversation of Mr. Fullerton, with the air of a timid animal contemplating a bolt for freedom; a bolt that he made, in effect, by turning his whole attention to Brenda immediately she entered the room. So far as Abby was concerned, Fullerton might have incontinently ceased to exist from that moment, though he remained as a mildly interested auditor throughout the interview.

"Ah, m'dear lady, I thought you wouldn't fail me," Abby began, "though that sleek butler-chap never came back. I was sure, oh, yes, sure really,

that you'd know how frightfully important it is —frightfully important."

He was evidently in a state of tremendous excitement. His eyes glowed, his slender figure was tense with partly suppressed energy, and his alert hands seemed to be endowed with an independent life of their own, gently touching objects here and there with a quick, appraising caress as if they sought the instant satisfaction of their longing, the handling of a paintbrush.

"It was this, just this," he continued, leading her over to the bay window, posing her just without the illumination of the flooding sunlight, and then stepping back to stare at her with eager, intense eyes. "This afternoon I shall have finished. Four o'clock, at latest. And, oh, my God, Hildegarde, I've done it, this time. I've brought it off, at last. It's *you*, you know. Of course it's a picture of that pool, all right. No one who doesn't know you right through, will see anything but that. But it's you I've been painting all the time, and, by God, I didn't know it, myself, until this morning. It came to me, all in a flash, as I woke. Lord, Lord," he suddenly began to crack his fingers in an ecstasy of impatience, "I didn't know what to do with myself. I jumped out of bed to look at the thing. I was afraid I'd only been dreaming. But I hadn't. Oh, no; rather not. It was there, all there, all that I'd wanted to paint in you and never known how to. All your cleanness, and brightness and strength, and behind it all, depth, depth, depth, going right down to the springing of

life. I've drawn you as a wooded pool in half-sunlight, Hildegarde, with all your surface beauties, all of them, and they're lovely, lovely, but simply nothing compared to the deeps of the pool from which they spring."

He was panting for breath, but when he paused he held up his hands imploring her not to interrupt him, and continued almost at once, "It—it was more than inspiration, m'dear lady; it was revelation. You'll know, this afternoon, when you see it. But I had to have one more look at you before I finished. By God, by God, by God, you know, if I put 'Portrait of a Lady' underneath, they'd see it—every one would. Couldn't help it. I dunno—I dunno—I might—if it isn't too damned literary. You'll see . . . Perhaps . . ."

He had turned away from her as he was speaking, and still mumbling something to himself quickly crossed the room and was gone before she could say a single word.

And with his going all the life and energy seemed to be momentarily drained out of her, and she suffered a feeling of such complete exhaustion that she was unable to stand, and clutched at the nearest chair to save herself from falling.

"Megalomania of a kind," her father commented, shuffling up to her; "there are, of course, many kinds. What's he think he has done? Painted a picture of something, I gather, that's somehow a picture of you at the same time. Damn clever, I don't doubt. But a dangerous feller to have about the place. Mad, in a way; there are

many ways, you know. Feel a bit done up, don't you? Takes it out of you, that sort of thing. I know. How's Mary?"

Mary! The thought of Mary came back to her as the thought of something which, although momentarily blotted out, had been all this time urgently begging at the door of her consciousness. For five minutes, Abby had held her in the immense grip of his spirit, had had complete power over her, had drained her vitality for his own uses. In those five minutes she would not have known if Mary had been dying in the same room. Now her strength was returning, and with it all her anxiety about her child and something of resentment against the illimitable egotism of the artist who had had no thought for anything but his own achievement.

"Mary! Yes. I'm going back to her at once," she said, getting up, and added, "I think you're right, father; it *is* a form of megalomania."

In her mind she had a vivid picture of Mary struggling with Miss Ingleby, a picture that seemed to grow continually brighter and stronger, overlaying and finally extinguishing the impression of Abby retreating from her across the room with humped shoulders and bowed head, completely absorbed by the ecstasy of his achievement.

And that afternoon, by four o'clock at latest, he had said, he would be returning with his completed masterpiece, demanding all her energy and attention, careless of anybody but her, though her child were dying or dead.

No, definitely no! She had made her choice and was not tempted to re-make it. All she had was for Tristram and her two children, and perhaps for the new life that might, even now, be springing within her.

If Mary wanted her that afternoon, Abby must be denied. She could only give a part of herself to him, and he wanted all; every breath of her body, the very life and strength of her soul.

3

But Mary did not want her that afternoon. Mary had been sick again while her mother was downstairs, and when Dr. Moult came an hour later he could find no indication of any tenderness in the neighbourhood of the appendix.

"Twite well again, now," was Mary's own report, "and vewy hungry."

Dr. Moult beamed at her through his spectacles. "I've been wondering," he remarked pleasantly, "whether a certain young lady of my acquaintance is not rather inclined to be a little greedy, perhaps? Eh? Eh? Just a little greedy, I fancy? And we may have to keep her on rather short commons for a day or two, eh? But there's nothing to worry about, my dear Mrs. Wing; nothing whatever. Yes, yes; let her get up by all means; even if she has to take things a leetle quietly to-day. And quite a mild dose of the usual medicine this evening will be sufficient."

Tristram and Brenda went down into the hall with the doctor when he left, not because they needed any further reassurance with regard to Mary, but because they wanted other news from him. He had been out when Tristram had come for him ; had been called for unexpectedly to see Mrs. Upchurch at the Home Farm, and they were anxious, now that their own fears were relieved, to hear what he had to tell them of his other patient.

"Hm ! I'm afraid, sadly afraid . . ." he reported, with an expressive droop of his large, firm mouth. "Yes, internal, and an operation of doubtful benefit in any case, though I did suggest it. Fine woman ; fine woman ; great pity."

He was at the hall door, already fully habited in the flat-topped hard felt hat, old brown dog-skin gloves and malacca cane, which were his professional insignia, and without which he never appeared on duty, when he paused, and turning the mild inquiry of his large eyes on Brenda, remarked :

"And I saw your young friend painting on the bridge, as I passed ; painting quite a remarkable picture, I thought, though I know little enough of such things. I really had to stop a moment and look, though he gave me no encouragement. But you've seen the picture in question, no doubt, Mrs. Wing ? "

"Not yet," Brenda said. "It's to be finished to-day, I believe." She was annoyed that she should feel slightly uncomfortable, too self-conscious, under the calm but definitely inquisitive stare of Dr. Moulton ; but it still seemed as if Abby

had taken something of herself with him when he had gone out of the library that morning, and as if every one must notice it. "You thought the picture was good, did you?" she concluded.

The doctor allowed his mild, almost childish gaze to wander out over the sunlit beauty of the terrace gardens.

"Odd, you know," he replied thoughtfully. "Not the sort of thing you and I would have made of that view, if we had had the ability to paint it. Not, in fact, if you press the point, particularly like it. But—dear me, Mrs. Wing, I hope you won't think me very foolish—there was, really I can't say how, seeing that it was unquestionably a picture of trees and water and sunlight; but there was a—a distinct suggestion of—of—well, of *you*, in it. . . ."

He continued to talk, but Brenda heard no more. At those last words of his a strange thrill had run up her spine to stir the roots of her hair, a thrill that was partly ecstasy and partly terror of something almost supernatural. She had abruptly to turn her head away lest Tristram and old Dr. Moult should see the unreasonable tears that were coming to her eyes; exquisite yet horribly painful tears, that caught at her throat and her breast.

But oh! as he had said little more than an hour ago, by God, he had done it, had brought it off this time; had made so perfect a work of art that even the steady, placid mind of Dr. Moult had been moved and quickened to interpret it. The artist had taken something from her, something vital,

eternal, and had imprisoned it in the masterly work of those delicate, inspired hands.

The thought made her tremble. A sense of passion and power ran through her. For an instant she seemed to reach again the heights of that moment when she had kissed Abby so near this very spot, and life had appeared to her as a beautiful flux that she could mould to her own desire.

And then, with a faint sense of giddiness, she was aware of herself standing on the front steps of the hall, confronted by the necessity to appear as the efficient, respectable wife of the squire, in the presence of her husband and the parish doctor—who still lingered, with that inquisitive, and now slightly suspicious, stare of his turned steadily upon her, she hoped, impassive profile.

"He's unquestionably a genius, doctor," she said steadily. "A very great genius in his own line. Perhaps, who knows, the greatest we've ever had?"

"Dear me, dear me. Is it possible?" grunted Dr. Moulton. "Well, well, I must be going. Take care of yourself, Mrs. Wing. Take great care of yourself. You're not looking quite in your usual health, if I may say so. A leetle pinched, I thought."

There was a brief silence after he had gone before Tristram said:

"I say, B, you *are* all right, aren't you? You don't think . . . already."

"I don't know, yet," she said. "It's possible. I'm not sure."

Tristram put his arm round her shoulders tenderly

and led her back into the house. "Oh! my lord, darling, I'm frightened," he said. "I don't, after all, want that to happen. I'd a thousand times sooner it didn't. But you're not sure, yet . . .?"

She clung to his physical strength and drew comfort from it. "I'm sure of one thing," she said, "which is that if it does happen, it's going to be all right—all right for you and me, and," she laughed softly, "and our—three children."

4

And it was with that thought definitely at the front of her mind, the thought of how everything must be "right" with her and hers while the new life—if there were to be a new life?—gathered strength within her—that she seated herself in the big oriel window of the morning-room, after lunch, to await the coming of Abby with his masterpiece.

Her father and mother had gone upstairs to lie down, and she had encouraged Tristram, who had appeared anxious to stay with her, to take a long tramp round the estate, warning him, however, to avoid the bridge by the Home Farm. She wanted, before all things, to be alone when Abby arrived. She knew that, in any case, she had a very trying ordeal before her, but it would be infinitely less trying if they were alone. Tristram's presence, deeply though she loved him, would necessitate the putting on of restraints. There were things she

could say to Abby that Tristram would not understand.

From the window she could see, fragmentarily, nearly half a mile of the drive along which Abby would presently come. At intervals the road itself was hidden by trees and shrubs, but there was one long clear space, just below the last bank of rhododendrons, to which she idly directed her attention, knowing that he could not cross it without being seen. That was the opening made by the great gale last autumn. She and the two children had been standing at that very window, watching, when the elms went down with a sudden tremendous crash, nine of them together, as if an invisible giant hand had carelessly swept them over. Mary had been frightened. . . .

She had a book on her lap, but she had not attempted to read yet. She wanted to prepare herself. She would be called upon to yield her spirit to Abby when he came, to give him the laud of praise he would seek from her. Probably she would say nothing ; just lose herself in admiration for the genius of his work. He would know.

It would have been so easy a month ago, but now she was afraid, not only because she could not forget the need to withhold something of her spirit (she would have to resist that terrific urgency of his which so completely exhausted her), but also because she was frightened of the picture itself. There must, she felt, be something almost supernatural about it. She could not understand how dear old Dr. Moult had been able to interpret it

with such startling truth? Art, even pure Art of the first order, needed qualities of understanding and response for their just appreciation. Dr. Moult would have been dumb before Rubens or Titian, so far as any essential criticism was concerned. What could there be in this picture of Abby's that transcended the art of Rubens, if it were not something psychical . . . uncanny?

And suppose that essential "something" had, as it were, evaporated by the time he showed it to her? Suppose she found in it only a masterly treatment of trees, water, and sunlight? What could she say? What could she do? How could she recover touch with him? The thought of the immense stresses to which she might be subjected terrified her.

It was a quarter to three. Not a leaf was moving in all the bright tranquillity of garden and park. The world was given over to the perfect stillness of the sunlight, and the soundless dancing of butterflies, settling, mounting, falling, deploying about the big beds of hot, red geraniums. . . . No one had passed the clearing. . . .

She was not sleepy. She was too anxious and too afraid to be sleepy. Her eyes were on the open stretch of the drive. But in an instant she was asleep; as if with one step she had passed out of the sunlight into absolute darkness. . . .

She leapt up into consciousness and light again through a dream world of gigantic horror and disaster. She had no recollection of anything that she might have dreamt, but as she opened her eyes

to find Tristram in the room, close to her chair, fondly looking down at her, she was aware of having passed through the terrors of a tragedy, the threat of which still remained.

"Have I been asleep? What's the time?" she asked anxiously.

"You have, darling; very sound asleep; and the time is a quarter-past four. Hasn't he been?" Tristram replied.

She put her hand up to her mouth with a perplexed gesture that was oddly uncharacteristic.

"I've been dreaming something—rather terrible," she said. "But I can't remember what."

"Why try?" Tristram suggested, with a smile.

That was the obvious wisdom of this world to which she had returned, and the influence of which grew momentarily stronger, overcoming that now dimly remembered command to do—she did not know what.

"Yes, after all, why try?" she repeated. "I must have been very sound asleep. But Tristram, I'm rather concerned about Abby. He said four, at latest."

Tristram laughed. "And he's so particularly scrupulous about keeping appointments to the very minute," he said. "You're sure he meant four o'clock *to-day*?"

Brenda stood up and looked out through the open door of the oriel window, past the still gyrating butterflies, over the broad patterning of the sunlight, to the empty length of the clearing. Only

the shadows seemed to have moved, while she was asleep.

"I know, I know," she said, with a touch of impatience; "but I'm anxious, nevertheless. This was not an ordinary occasion. I suppose you didn't go anywhere near the bridge, when you were out?"

"Never within a mile of it," Tristram returned. "I was too careful of your instructions."

Without turning her head, she held out her hand to him. "I'm going down there, now," she said. "Come with me, darling. I'm—I'm frightened."

"Why not have tea, first?" he suggested. "He's probably just in the throes of the final touch. He'll come all right."

He had taken her outstretched hand and she pulled him towards her. "Yes, I hope so. I hope you're right, darling," she said. "But you'll come with me, won't you? Shall we go at once?"

He looked down at her with an expression of slightly puzzled anxiety. For the first time in his knowledge of her, she was speaking and acting uncharacteristically. She had often surprised him, often said and done things that he could not understand, but they had always been in some way or another characteristic of her.

"You don't feel ill, B, do you?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No, no. Come along," she said. "I know I'm being odd, darling. I can't help it. I feel as if I were being called."

She clung to his arm as they went down the drive, but they did not, despite her feeling of

urgency, walk very quickly. And when they came to the clearing she stopped and looked back at the Hall and the oriel window in which she had first watched and then slept. For a moment, it seemed to her that she saw a thin, shabby figure dark against the white, sunlit stone, peering in at her empty chair, and then she knew it for the shadow of the tall poplar; the shadow that began to fall on the house when September came, growing higher with the declining sun until it was lost in the darkness of the winter afternoons.

What was she doing there?

"We might have missed him, you see," she explained to Tristram. She was afraid to tell him that she was trembling with the dread of what they might find when they turned the next corner and came in sight of the bridge. "He might have gone back to the cottage for something and gone up to the house another way," she added. "Well, anyhow, we'll go and see if he's still—still there."

"I'm absolutely certain you're upsetting yourself about nothing, old girl," Tristram fondly consoled her as they continued, quite slowly now, their descent of the drive.

"I hope so; I expect so," she said, setting her teeth hard and making a strong muscular effort to control the spasm of trembling that threatened her. "It was that dream, I think. The dream I can't remember. It was terrible, and——"

She broke off abruptly as they turned the loop of the drive, but, ahead of them, the bridge lay empty in the sunlight.

"There you are, you see," Tristram said cheerfully.

And then, suddenly, she began to run. . . .

Abby was there, as she had known he would be, not on the bridge, but hunched, rather precariously as it seemed, on the bank of the stream below. He was leaning forward, nursing his left wrist in his right hand, and shaking visibly from head to foot, dithering like a cold, wet spaniel. Even from the bridge it was obvious that he had been in the water and was soaked to the skin.

And to Brenda, it was not less obvious that all the spirit had gone out of him. Clutching the parapet and gazing down at him, she feared the revelation of the moment when he should look up and meet her eyes. And, indeed, for an instant as he raised his head, she saw only a dishevelled heap of dark clothes, and the dead mask of a foolish, empty face.

But as their eyes met, a spark was kindled in him, a faint whimsical smile trembled about his mouth, and releasing his left wrist he reached for and picked up some object that lay by his side—the remains of what might once have been an artist's canvas, the stretcher smashed, the canvas ripped, a draggled, unrecognisable ruin. He held it out to her.

"Ah! Ah! The picture, m'dear lady," he said.

IX

BRENDA FAINTS

I

TRISTRAM had carried him most of the way up to the Hall. After his first valiant effort to present a brave face to the world, Abby had nearly fainted.

"But, I say, old chap, how did it happen?" Tristram had asked, as soon as he had got him up on to the drive.

Abby had looked helplessly at Brenda, and had then shaken his head. His teeth had been tightly clenched, and would, no doubt, have chattered horribly if he had opened them. He could, at least, stop that, if he could not control the trembling of his body.

For the first few hundred yards they had supported him, one on either side.

"How long had you been there, old chap?" Tristram had begun again, sympathetically.

And at that Abby had stopped and had seemed to pull himself together. The trembling of his body had stopped and he had spoken clearly, if weakly.

"An hour or ten years," he had said. "Not quite sure. I say, Wing, that arm you're holding. I'm afraid I can't——" Until then he had kept

his left hand hidden in his coat pocket, and they had not suspected the quality of his injury. Then, very tenderly, he had withdrawn his hand which had hung helplessly from his arm.

"I feel so devilish sick," he had added, turning his head away.

Even then he had not quite fainted.

Tristram and Giles between them had put him to bed. The car had been sent to fetch Dr. Moulton.

2

"The wrist is not broken, I believe," was Dr. Moulton's report. "Just dislocated, and, of course badly sprained. I've set it in a splint and given him a small injection of morphia which took effect with unusual rapidity. In fact, if you press the point, I can't swear that he didn't go to sleep, off his own bat, while I was giving it to him."

"He's pretty sure to be all right now, then?" Tristram suggested hopefully.

They had come into the morning-room to escape the Fullertons, whose interest was centred, just then, upon an unanticipated personal crisis in their own affairs; and, before he answered, Dr. Moulton crossed the room and stood for a moment looking out of the oriel window.

"As to that," he said, turning back to Tristram and Brenda, and appearing to address an imaginary third person who stood between them, "it's really impossible to say anything, anything at all."

Brenda leaned back in her chair and laid her hands along the arms. She knew that something important was coming and she wanted to hear it, but she felt incapable of any effort or any feeling. Some part of herself had been withdrawn since Abby had spoken that one valiant sentence to her as she stood upon the bridge. She was fully aware of the life about her, but it affected her only as a drama that she watched a little distantly.

Dr. Moulton turned his benevolent, simple stare upon her as he continued, "We doctors pretend a sort of omniscience, as you know very well, Mrs. Wing. We have to; and not alone in our own interests. If our patients didn't believe in us, where should we be? But I'm quite aware, quite aware, my dear lady, that I haven't deceived you in that particular. And I declare that it would not in the least surprise me to learn," he attempted a smile that was meant to be as humorous as the tone of his voice, but had a distinctly rueful quality, "to learn that you regarded me as a kind of fetish to magic the little girls, eh?"

"Oh, hang it, Moulton. No, no; rather not," Tristram put in, uncomfortably conscious of the scene by Mary's bed that morning.

"But, after all, why not, Wing; why not?" Dr. Moulton returned. "I'm willing to admit a strong vein of truth in the accusation; I am, indeed. I've been here, dear me, over thirty years now,—I shall be sixty-four this month,—and I know no more of the causes of human ailments than I did when I left the hospital—if as

much—if as much. Let us be honest about it, for once.

“Well, well, and about this poor young man upstairs. You’ll have recognised, no doubt, that he has no physique, almost none at all. A mere wisp of a man, he is, emaciated, and, in a medical sense, all to pieces; never taken any care of himself. Indeed, it’s a terrible wreck of a body he has. But a spirit, my dear Wing, a spirit like steel; and gallant—yes, I think, I might say, gallant. They feel pain, that sort, Wing, more than you or I do; just as we, perhaps, are more sensitive than fellows like Joe Popple, who positively never turned a hair while I cut his flesh about with scissors, after he had torn his foot in a snare last year. All the same, our young friend upstairs allowed me to set his wrist without a murmur, and somehow or another managed not to faint, as I’d half hoped he would. And all that endurance and heroism was, I honestly believe, nothing but a kind of—if I may say so—of swagger; and all of a piece with his absolute refusal to give me the least hint of how the accident occurred. Can you enlighten me under that head, by the way?”

“It’s a complete and absolute mystery to me, Moulton,” Tristram said, and added, “What do you make of it, B?”

“At present, nothing,” she said. “I’ve been trying to feel my way towards it, but nothing comes.” That was true, but she could not explain further, just then, that what stood between her and the discovery of the solution she sought, was her

own sense of having been heartless, of having deliberately prepared herself against the coming of Abby, of having denied him the comfort and support of her spirit when he most needed them.

"You've no theory, eh, Mrs. Wing?" Dr. Moulton asked.

"None that satisfies me," she said. "I've wondered if it were possible. . . . You see, he was here this morning, before you came, and he told me that he had painted a masterpiece, that that picture of the pool, was, as you guessed, doctor, somehow also a picture of me. I'd never seen him so exultant, so entirely pleased with his own work. And he left me to add the finishing touches. He said that he would bring it to me by four o'clock at latest. And I've been wondering if it were possible that at the end . . . he bungled . . . and ran amuck . . . smashed his easel and the picture, and tried to commit suicide."

"The picture, eh?" Dr. Moulton inquired. "That was destroyed, then?"

By way of answer, Brenda got up, went over to her bureau, opened it, and took out the remains of a canvas that might have measured about twenty-four inches by twenty—a proportion that was, perhaps, open to the criticism of being a shade too squat; just as Brenda's rather square shoulders and strong figure produced an effect of her being also a thought too broad for her height.

"Completely destroyed," she said, tendering the canvas to him.

He took it almost reverently, and attempted to

straighten it by setting the broken sides of the stretcher with the same delicacy and tenderness he might have shown for a living patient. Then he shook his head, and gently laid the canvas on the table.

"I believe you're right, my dear Mrs. Wing," he said. "No casual accident could have produced that result. That picture has been deliberately, and, we might say, almost malignantly destroyed. Dear me! Dear me! A sudden fit of passion, or—or of despair? With that temperament, it seems to me extremely probable. But what a pity; what a pity!"

Brenda stood by the table staring down at the mangled remains. A great hole had been kicked through the centre; the sides of the stretcher smashed in two places, and the whole canvas, apparently, violently bent back as if in an attempt to crumple it into a heap. But beyond that,—possibly when the attempt to crumple it had failed,—the picture had been brutally stamped and trampled upon. And all this had happened while some of the paint, at least, was still wet. Two corners only had remained relatively intact, glowing still with colour and a hint of golden sunlight.

It was upon one of these corners that Brenda had suddenly become intent.

"Oh, Tristram," she said, looking up after a moment or two, and speaking with a stiff, unnatural calm, "you undressed him, didn't you? Do you remember, by any chance, what shoes he was wearing?"

"Those same old, brown canvas shoes of his. Why?" Tristram replied without hesitation.

Brenda's colour was horribly draining away from her cheeks and lips, but when Dr. Moulton made a quick step towards her, she held up her hand to stop him. There was something to be done first, the evidences of a beastly, unspeakable crime to be hidden, before she could allow herself to faint.

3

It was the realisation of having achieved that, the memory of having safely locked that mangled corpse in her bureau, which came first to her mind when she returned to find herself feeling sick and giddy, lying full length on the morning-room carpet, with Dr. Moulton kneeling beside her, his fingers on her pulse.

In the room beyond—a vast, illimitable room it had seemed to her at the moment of her return—she was aware, at first very remotely and then with a quick accession of power as if a shutter within herself had been rapidly thrown open, of the sound of voices raised in discussion.

"Naturally, my dear Tristram," her mother was saying, "if you expose her to these vulgar scenes, in her condition, you must expect her to faint. But really there's nothing to make a fuss about, and I've something very important that I wish to communicate to both of you, as soon as possible."

And then Tristram, "Impossible, now, in any

case." His voice was stern and hard. "We're going to put her to bed, at once."

The sickness and giddiness had passed, but as yet she felt incapable of making any mental effort, above all of combating her mother.

"I'm all right again now," she said in a low voice to Dr. Moulton. "But send them away—all but Tristram."

She closed her eyes again, seeking a shelter in darkness, and was hardly aware that Dr. Moulton had gone from her side until she heard his voice adding another note to the discussion by the door.

"Quiet . . . absolutely indispensable . . . I must insist . . ." she heard him say. And then, thank Heaven, the riot began to retreat, ceasing suddenly with the closing of the door.

She opened her eyes and sat up, to find herself alone with Tristram, who was just preparing to kneel down by her.

She put out her hands to him. "I'm all right now," she said. "Pull me up. What did she want; mother, I mean?"

"Never mind that now, darling," he returned, quite unnecessarily supporting her, as she took two steps across the room to a chesterfield. "Nothing to worry you about."

"Oh, all that's the matter with me," she said brightly, "is that I've had no tea. Will you ring, darling? I've a passionate longing for tea, just at the moment."

Poor Tristram! He had such an anxious, wistful

look upon his face as he crossed the room to ring the bell. He loved her so absolutely. And that was an essential factor in the torturing puzzle to which she must presently give her attention. Presently would do. She had plenty of time.

Giles's almost instant response to the call of the bell brought with it an effect of the general tensity prevailing beyond the doors of the morning-room. The staff of the Hall had evidently been quickened and disturbed by the startling events of the afternoon,—three events, of one of which Brenda was still carelessly ignorant.

"Only tea, Giles," she said, smiling at the rather urgent solicitude of his manner.

"Tea, ma'm," he repeated. "And I hope, ma'm——"

"Entirely, thank you, Giles," she said. "Very stupid of me to faint, but not at all serious."

"I'm extremely glad to hear it, ma'm," Giles returned with relief. "And Dr. Moult, ma'm, asked me to say that he has gone up to have another look at Mr. Mattocks, and will be down again in a very few minutes."

He came down again, as a matter of fact, on the heels of his own message, to report that Abby was sleeping, would probably sleep for some time, and that the quite dependable parish nurse should be sent up to watch him.

"It isn't his actual injuries that are serious," he added, "but he has had, I gather, a perfectly cataclysmal nerve-crisis. And with that kind of temperament and physique one never knows what

the effect may be. However, Nurse White is very capable."

Brenda left Tristram to make the conventional responses to this report. She was trying to realise what Abby's actual nervous condition would be, and could find but one explanation of his reactions since the tragedy. He was stunned—none of his wounds, spiritual or physical, had, as yet, begun to twist him. Presently . . . Oh, yes, and she would wait until that time arrived. Dr. Moult was speaking to her again and his advice was very pertinent.

"Take life very quietly, very quietly, for a day or two, my dear Mrs. Wing. You have a wonderful constitution, wonderful, and I'm not the least uneasy about you. But, if I can venture a guess,—indeed, I had a shrewd suspicion this morning, and, if you press the point, I would say that it is something more than a mere guess—in short, mayn't I, as a very old friend, if not your own medical adviser, assume that there is a strong probability of . . . of, perhaps, an heir?"

"A probability, yes," Brenda agreed, looking up at Tristram's unhappy face. She seemed quite unable to inspire him with her own confidence.

She tried again when she and he were alone together with the tea for which she had craved, and which did not disappoint her when it came.

"Have faith, darling," she said. "I know so certainly, inside, that it will be all right."

"I should not have minded, B, if it hadn't been for last time," he returned.

But they were quite happy together, and Brenda consciously, luxuriously resting, when the third event of the day intruded again, this time with a settled determination that could not be denied.

4

Tristram jumped to his feet with an angry frown as his mother-in-law entered.

"Please ; please," he said, crossing the room to meet her, and putting up his hand as if warning her to silence. "Not now. Brenda must be kept quiet."

"Nonsense," Mrs. Fullerton returned. "I know perfectly well what's the matter with Brenda, and she's quite capable of hearing what I have to say."

Tristram shook his head. In this thing he could be as obstinate as Mrs. Fullerton herself. But Brenda intervened.

"It's all right, dear, quite all right," she said. "I want to hear what mother has to say. *That* won't upset me."

The last phrase slipped from her without consideration, and Tristram misunderstood it. Mrs. Fullerton did not.

"Why you should bother your head about this miserable artist, I can't think," she said, "more especially as I gather that he's got nothing more serious than a sprained wrist. . . ."

"Really, I don't see why Brenda should be

worried with all this, just now," Tristram interrupted her, and his tone, no doubt, served to remind Mrs. Fullerton that as her chief object, at the moment, was to engage his and Brenda's sympathies, she might do well, for once, to essay more tactful measures.

"Well, well," she said, getting past him and taking a chair close to her daughter, "you must make some excuse for me. I've been greatly upset. You see, Brenda, incredible as it must seem to you, your father has actually, after all, written to this horrible person at Fullerton, saying that he's willing to sell. And he must, *at all costs*, be prevented from sending that letter."

"But I thought he'd agreed——" Brenda began, not daring to look at Tristram for fear that the smile which had already dawned in her eyes should show on her lips. So often she had wondered if her father would not, one day, assert himself, and the thought of him in revolt amused her fancy.

"He did; most positively. I believed that everything was settled," her mother continued. "And then, this afternoon. . . . Well, you heard him refuse to come to church this morning, and he, I thought, behaved rather queerly after lunch. He refused to lie down as he generally does, said he had a lot of business to think about, and—well, I didn't insist. He was, I noticed, smiling to himself in an odd way that was not like him, but I had no idea what his smile meant; not then.

"You know, Brenda, I'm really uneasy about him. His behaviour this afternoon was so very

odd. He did not, for instance, lose his temper as he always does, but just smiled in that odd way—odd is the only word for it—I've described to you. In fact, he has been behaving very queerly altogether.

"Did he write the letter while you were lying down after lunch?" Brenda asked.

"Yes; he admits that," Mrs. Fullerton replied. "And he has told me what the letter contains. But I haven't seen it. He had got it in his pocket, and when I insist on his giving it to me, he smiles and goes out of the room."

Tristram, so far, seemed to have missed all the humour of the situation. "But what do you expect us to do?" he asked impatiently.

Mrs. Fullerton dropped to a confidential note that she rarely used. "I want you both to persuade him that he is being very foolish," she said. "You can reason with him in a way that I cannot. He will, at least, *listen* to you. . . ."

Brenda, leaning back into the corner of the chesterfield, was following her own line of thought, while she listened with some other part of her mind to all that was being said. She was remembering her girlhood, more particularly that critical age when she had reacted so violently against the kind of life her parents were living, and had first begun to formulate for herself the principle of non-interference. Never, she had decided, would she attempt to force her own opinions, her own philosophy, her own inclinations or way of life upon another person.

And surely she had been justified, by the example of this couple, who, after nearly thirty years of married life spent in criticising and opposing each other, had succeeded only in intensifying both their own and the other's point of view, and were now come to a climax of disagreement ?

She waited until her mother had with much repetition stated her fundamental proposition, and then said quietly.

"No, mother. I won't interfere. Tristram can do as he pleases, but I won't."

"You mean that you take your father's side ?" Mrs. Fullerton asked sharply.

"I take neither side, mother," Brenda said. "Why should I ? Why should I try to force your opinion upon father any more than his opinion upon you ?"

"Because I'm obviously right and he's just as obviously in the wrong," her mother replied.

"I'm not at all sure that I agree with you there," Tristram put in.

"Although nothing would induce you to sell your own family place," Mrs. Fullerton retorted.

"Despite your solicitations to give up a country life," Tristram said with a wistful smile.

"Quite another thing," Mrs. Fullerton corrected him. "I never advised you to sell the place. I shouldn't be such a fool."

Poor lady, she was being hardly tried. After all these years of power, her perfect confidence had been most unexpectedly shaken. She had ruled by that confidence ; had never until to-day doubted

her ability finally to impose her will upon her husband. So might any autocrat feel who, after thirty years of military rule, is at last challenged to shoot, and finds that his soldiers and guns are all dummies. For, now that she was being successfully defied, Mrs. Fullerton was beginning to understand that she had not a single shot in her locker. She could only threaten.

"Am I to understand, then," she continued, "that you, both of you, absolutely refuse to help me? That you'll stand by and let your father sell Fullerton after all these centuries?"

"Well, dear," Brenda said, a little touched by the unusual pathos in her mother's voice, "it isn't as if you really cared for the place or ever went there."

Mrs. Fullerton turned upon her almost fiercely. The Yorkshire Piggott, so carefully hidden for thirty years, had suddenly broken covert.

"What I should like very much to know," she demanded, "is just what your father has been saying to you about this affair. For it's quite evident that you've all three been putting your heads together to get the better of me. Of course, I can understand, Brenda, that Fullerton means nothing to *you, now*. You're much too wrapped up in your own affairs to care what's best for your father or me. But I am grieved and more than a little disgusted to find you plotting with your father against me. I certainly did not expect that."

Brenda's steady blue eyes were tranquilly watching her mother's face, seeking to discover how far

this accusation arose from a real conviction, and how far from the unscrupulous intention of foisting a charge, any embarrassing charge, on the enemy of the moment. This was the method by which she had conquered her husband—the idle peace-lover who had not had the vitality to oppose the stubborn determination of this peasant-woman. (For though she was unaware of the fact herself, only one generation separated Charlotte Fullerton from the true peasant stock. John Piggott, her grandfather, dead ten years before she was born, had begun life, at eight years old, as a farmer's boy, and had not learned to read and write until he was twenty-one.)

And perhaps it was the peasant in Charlotte Fullerton that was unable to endure something in the quality of her daughter's quiet scrutiny. Under that cool examination, her own eyes shifted uneasily, her neck stiffened, and her head began to tremble. She had but one resort, to lose her temper completely, to rave and rant, hurling abuse and contempt indiscriminately in the manner of her simple ancestors. For a moment, she must have tottered on the verge of that abysmal self-revelation. Not in thirty years had she been tried so hardly as to-day. But in that moment she was able to regain control of the primitive thing that had so nearly escaped. She rose, not without dignity, and then, standing very upright, with her lips composed but slightly, a trifle breathlessly, parted, she shrugged her powerful shoulders and said :

“In any case, your father and I had better

leave to-morrow, for every reason. No doubt he will recover his senses when I get him away from *you*. And with this sick artist-person of yours in the house——”

She left her sentence there with a tone, a gesture, and an expression of disgust that mere words could only have weakened.

“If you will kindly make arrangements,” she concluded. “The earliest convenient train, if you please, Tristram!”

“You needn’t look at me like that, darling,” Brenda said when her mother had gone. “I’m perfectly well. But oh, my dear old boy, isn’t it devastating?”

“She ought to be made to understand——” Tristram began.

“No, no,” Brenda put in quickly. “Don’t think of it, for a minute. Never, never can she be made to understand. She doesn’t *want* to understand. I’ve often wondered, you know, about my Piggott ancestors? I can’t help thinking that they must have been very simple people. There’s a strong streak of the primitive ancestor in Mary . . .”

Tristram was remembering that his mother-in-law had said to him that morning, “It’s quite impossible to teach people of that class. It isn’t that they *can’t* learn, it is that they *won’t*.”

“I expect you’re right, old girl,” he said. “You generally are about these things. Now, hadn’t you better go upstairs and rest a bit before dinner?”

“Yes, I will, to please you,” Brenda agreed.

" But not because I need a rest, or mean to make a habit of it. Don't be too solicitous, dear old man ; it might become a nuisance. Trust me to take good care of myself. I will."

And she thought her " I will " with ever more determination that she had said it. Her duty was clear ; so clear that neither argument from without nor philosophy from within could conceivably modify in any particular the course she must set herself for the next eight months. She had deliberately, willingly, offered herself to be the instrument of creation, and having been accepted, she must devote herself to the service of the sanctuary that was her body and spirit.

It might be that all her efforts would be negative, that the wonderful and sacred process would gather no more positive help from her than the tranquillity and warmth an egg may gather from the sitting hen. But if she were unsure whether any wish of hers could add anything to the moral or physical well-being of the son she longed for, she was perfectly sure that it was in her power to detract from it. He—she had so strong an intuition that this time it would be a boy—must be undisturbed in his nesting-place, fed by all the sweetness that could be drawn only from a watching mother who maintained an untroubled mind and body. And to that end she must be willing to sacrifice her own personal desires and those of the people about her ; her father and mother, Abby, even Tristram himself. She was no longer a woman with ordinary human relationships, she was a high-priestess

guarding the chamber in which wonderful, unknowable forces were shaping a new life. . . .

She looked into Abby's room on the way to her own, and found that Nurse White, a sympathetic, capable woman of fifty or so, had already arrived.

Abby was lying on his back, his injured arm in its splints, laid straight out upon the counterpane. He was asleep, but he looked as if he were dead. His mouth was a little open and his breathing so light that the rise and fall of his lungs was almost invisible. And his face, white as ash, no doubt, under the tan that now showed a green and sickly yellow, was set into the unheeding resignation of a stone mask.

Brenda glanced at him and immediately looked away. This was something of which she dared not think.

"I suppose he's all right? He's such a dreadful colour, and so still," she whispered to Nurse White.

"It's the mor-phi-a," the nurse returned soundlessly, but shaping the last word so clearly with her lips that it could not be mistaken.

Brenda crept silently out of the room, but even when the door had softly closed behind her with one faint, definitive click, she felt constrained to move quietly, furtively. That grimly resigned mask was not a thing to be lightly forgotten. The sight of it followed her into her own room, and remained with her when she lay outstretched upon her own bed. When she closed her eyes, it came very near to her; when she opened them she saw

it poised above her head, a blind presence immensely still that nevertheless made some impossible demand.

Then, in an instant, it had vanished ; but before she could breathe her relief she became aware that terrible, hitherto suppressed thoughts were rising rapidly into her consciousness ; confused, repulsive thoughts of wanton brutality ; of gross men in clumsy, hob-nailed boots stamping on a work of delicate, inspired beauty ; exposing and torturing, with coarse, heedless hands, the exquisite tenderness of sensitive, agonised nerves. . . .

It was unbearable. She panted with a fierce lust to avenge that filthy crime ; to punish and punish and punish yet again that callous brutishness.

Had they left him with a bestial guffaw of triumph ? Oh, the filthy beasts ; the filthy, filthy beasts !

And was it thus that she could learn to keep the sacred vows of the high-priestess ?

5

Neither Brenda nor her mother came down to dinner that evening, and Tristram and Fullerton dining solemnly alone, found little to say to one another until the meal was finished. The weather was of the same kind that they had been having for a month or more and called for no remark other than the already well-worn comment on the record-breaking quality of the drought. The bird was a

little too fresh, and for a couple of minutes an uncertain wind of conversation anent the shooting sprang up, but it quickly died out again, leaving them once more so hopelessly becalmed that not another sentence was attempted until Giles and the parlour-maid left them alone with the port and the dessert.

Even then, it seemed doubtful whether that threat of intimate talk which was unquestionably in the air would mature. Fullerton was crouching in his chair fiddling with his glass, slowly twisting it by the stem, lifting it idly to the light, or gazing reflectively into the little pool of tawny crimson liquid as if he were questing an augury in the ruby heart of the wine.

He ought to have worn a look of content. He had won a victory that day, and should now have been enjoying the fruits of it, at liberty to crumple his shirt front into any shape he pleased without reprimand. But although he certainly appeared to have made the most of his opportunity in the matter of his shirt front, instead of being content he gave every sign of being profoundly distressed.

"Fact is, my boy," he said at last, glancing up at his son-in-law with a look that besought his sympathy, "fact is, I'm not made right."

Tristram, aroused from a long, unsatisfying quest of fate's intentions with regard to Brenda and himself, failed to catch the drift of this statement. "Eh? How? I don't think I quite follow you," he apologised.

"Even the shape of me's wrong somehow,"

Fullerton continued thoughtfully, slowly nodding his head and sadly contemplating his son-in-law's creaseless shirt and the set of his dinner-jacket. "Look at you, for instance. You don't take any trouble about yourself. Never see you going about like some o' these fellows, feeling their ties, pulling down their waistcoats, and twitching up their trousers even when they go upstairs; but you always look well-dressed; always, whatever you've got on. It's your figure; you're made right. You'd look well-dressed in a suit of reach-me-downs from the City Road. All Saville Row can't make me look like anything but a last year's scarecrow."

"It doesn't matter, you know," Tristram's smile was one of kindly sympathy. "Just happens like that, doesn't it?"

"Perfectly right, my boy, it doesn't matter," Fullerton replied. "Not a ha'porth. Or wouldn't if Charlotte'd only try to forget it. But it does matter when a man's never allowed to have any peace of mind."

Tristram sighed. "I know. It's the devil," he agreed. "But I thought that, to-day——?"

"That's what I want to talk to you about, my boy, if I may?" Fullerton said, hunching his right shoulder and crossing his legs. "You see, my boy, I can't keep it up. No! I can't keep it up! It's like this. I got a mood on me, this morning. Began at breakfast. I'd given in about selling Fullerton, great relief as it would have been to me to sell, and when Charlotte started in about not being dressed for church, I—I rebelled. Then

when I came to think about it afterwards, I saw that the rebellion had, more or less, come off. I'd got my own way for once, although it was only about a trifle.

"And, after that, I saw that artist fellow, just a shred of a man physically, getting his own way about every blessed thing he wanted ; riding roughshod over every one just because he didn't care a damn about anything but what he was after at the minute. He ain't much to look at or to talk to, but he's got spirit, that chap."

"My Lord, he has," Tristram put in, "but I'd very much like to know——"

"Presently, if you don't mind, old boy," Fullerton interrupted him. "I'd like just to finish this first. You see, it was like this ; what with one little thing and another, I did, for once, get worked up. And I was inspired, I may say, to try a new method. I didn't argue and I didn't lose my temper. I'd got something to hold over Charlotte, and she had to do all the hard work.

"And—and—I don't know if you'll understand this. I got a feeling of a sort of power ; a feeling of being pleased with myself. All the afternoon I felt like that. All the afternoon—pretty nearly up to dinner-time. . . ."

His voice, which had had a new note of boasting in it, dropped and tailed off.

"Was there any particular reason, why . . . ?" Tristram asked.

"Not in the sense you mean," Fullerton said. "No scene, or anything of that sort. Charlotte

hasn't spoken to me since tea-time,—except to tell me that we're leaving by the first train to-morrow. But, no, it wasn't that. It's just what I began with, my boy ; I'm not made right somehow. I can't keep it up, you see. By half-past seven, I was done. All the spirit had gone out of me by then. I'm one of those people who like peace at any price. I haven't even the spirit to bully Charlotte now I've got the chance. I'd sooner not bully her. I'd give her everything she wants if she'd only let me alone, but she hasn't got the intelligence to see that ; or else it is that she really enjoys bullying me. Yes, I fancy that must be the truth of it. She must get some feeling of enjoyment out of it, just as I did for an hour or two this afternoon. Only, with her it lasts. Things do last with her. She's got a will like—like a mountain. You can feel it. I can feel it down here. Nothing could ever alter her. Nothing."

" You're going to give up the letter ? " Tristram inquired quietly. He had not been asked for advice.

" Well, the truth is," Fullerton replied, " that I never wrote it. So I think, if you don't mind, I'd better go and do that now. Or—or," he straightened himself, and made a futile dab at his crumpled shirt front, " or do you think it would be all right, if I just said that I'd destroyed it ? "

Tristram hesitated a moment and then said, " I think I'd write it, if I were you. It will save explanations."

X

BRENDA'S THEORY

I

BRENDA was not one of those people who deliberately turn away from the ugly things of life. She had never tried to deceive herself into the belief that the world was all beautiful nor that all human beings were, or ought to be, perfectly happy. But if she had not denied the existence of vice and ugliness, neither had she sought them. And her balance between these two attitudes was turned in the matter of Sunday's outrage by her condition. Something within her refused, after that first shock of horror, to contemplate the thought of a brutal attack upon Abby by a party of village roughs, and when she awoke on Monday morning this refusal was in process of being rationalised by her conscious mind.

She must, she told herself, have been mistaken in her inferences. What she had taken for the mark of a hob-nailed boot upon the canvas of the mutilated picture was probably caused by small pebbles ; just such small pebbles as were to be found in plenty on the gravel drive. Yesterday she had been hysterical. She had never been hysterical before, but the emotional experiences she had suffered that Sunday—beginning with the threat of Mary's

illness and steadily accumulating throughout the afternoon—were enough to upset any woman, in her condition.

Moreover, the other explanation of the mystery had some quality that brought to her a sense of relief, or release, apart altogether from the relief, or release, it afforded of denying the other horrible suspicion.

She was already well advanced in the rationalising process, when Tristram suddenly said :

“ I say, B, what do you suppose did happen yesterday ? ”

“ Well, what could it have been but—but a kind of hysteria, a sort of madness, perhaps ? ” she demanded.

Tristram’s “ Yes ? ” sounded very doubtful.

“ You don’t believe that ? ”

“ Don’t know what else to believe, all the same,” he admitted. “ But granting that Abby’s a mighty queer fish, I can’t somehow quite see him smashing that picture and trying to commit suicide—unless——”

“ There was no ‘ unless ’ of that kind,” she said firmly. “ It had nothing to do with me. He hasn’t attempted to make love to me, in any way, since he came back.”

Tristram thought that it was an “ extraordinarily queer business altogether.”

“ Well,” Brenda said in the tone of one who is prepared with a satisfactory explanation, “ it would be extraordinary if it were you or me.”

“ But he was so damned proud of that picture of his,” Tristram objected.

"I know. I know. But——" Brenda began. It was all coming to her as she lay there, a dream, a soothing fantasy, unfolding itself with an effect of convincing sequence and logic.

"Shall I tell you just how it comes to me?" she continued. "I know him so well in most ways, and—and I can imagine so clearly how it *might* all have happened. You see, he had worked himself up into a state of tremendous excitement. He was more excited, more above himself, than I've ever known him, when he came in to see me yesterday morning. And he must have reached a climax of some sort when the picture was actually finished, when he dare not add another touch. And then, all in a moment, it meant nothing to him. What was he to do with it? He wouldn't want to sell it or to exhibit it, because whatever it might appear to the average person, it was, you know, in a sense—Abby's sense,—meant to be a kind of picture of me. And I think it came over him all in a heap how *useless* it was, if you know what I mean; that the important thing, the great thing, was the making of it; was in all the control and genius he'd brought to his work, not in the picture itself. So, as I see it, he smashed the picture in a perfect ecstasy of egotism. He had been fine, splendid, and he wanted to go on, to do something more splendid still, to be somehow immensely great. He couldn't endure the thought of inaction, just then; of not being or doing something tremendous.

"And that ecstasy, that madness, of you like,

T.M.P.

P

gave him the strength to destroy his work utterly. He must have gone at it in a fury, breaking the frame and then stamping the canvas face downwards on to the pebbles. You can see the marks of the pebbles——”

“And then?” Tristram asked, as she made a long pause.

“Oh, then, the sight of an abyss of despair, right at his feet,” she said. “He had gone a step further, and now there was less hope of satisfaction than ever. He had as good as destroyed himself already; there was nothing left but to do the thing itself out of hand, before he had time to cool. And, of course, he bungled it. He wouldn’t stop to consider that the fall was only a few feet, and that there was hardly enough water in the river to drown him. All that came to him with the shock of the reaction; and by then he had lost the courage to kill himself.”

“I expect you’re right, B,” Tristram acknowledged, “though I can’t pretend to understand it. All the same, I do see that it’s quite possible, and, after all, there isn’t any other explanation.”

“Absolutely none,” Brenda replied.

Now she could be content until such time as Abby himself chose to speak.

2

He was awake when she went to his room at nine o’clock. A trained nurse from Exeter had been telephoned for, and the car had already gone to

fetch her, but it was time that Nurse White, who had not been prepared for an all-night vigil, was relieved, and Brenda proposed to stay until the new nurse arrived.

Abby was lying on his back, very still, with his arms laid out on the quilt. He caught the eye at once as the one discrepant object in that large, bright, clean room. He had been washed and an attempt made to brush the mat of his rebellious hair. But no washing would remove the stains from his fingers which showed up as a fine study in browns against the background of the spotless quilt, and Nurse White had not been equal to the task of shaving him,—a telling omission in Abby's case, for he had a close, dark beard and moustache that grew astonishingly fast.

Nurse White, herself, was obviously dissatisfied with the effect she had produced. "Perhaps if Mr. Wing could lend me a safety razor . . . ?" she suggested doubtfully.

"Oh, well, we needn't worry him about that, for the present," Brenda said, and then becoming aware that she was dropping into the uncomfortable professional habit of speaking before the patient as if he were just so much material to be dealt with, she added, "You don't want to be bothered with that, do you, Abby?"

He had opened his eyes when Brenda came into the room, but now he closed them again and slightly shook his head with an expression which indicated clearly enough that he did not wish to be bothered with anything.

"He slept all through the night," Nurse White said, "and ate a bit of breakfast, but I fancy he still feels a little sick. He says his wrist hasn't pained him much. What time did you expect the doctor?"

"I think he'll be sure to come first thing," Brenda said.

Looking down at Abby, who gave no sign of any interest, she noticed a new droop about the corners of his mouth, a droop that added something of sadness and determination to his face, and gave him a look of age. Abby had never had any age in her experience of him. He was at the same time so old and so absurdly young, he had had the wisdom of the old and the impulses of a child. It had always seemed ridiculous to her to think of Abby as having any particular age.

"Then, I'd better wait until he comes, I think," Nurse White continued cheerfully. "I shan't feel tired, not yet, not till after lunch. It often happens that I get called to sit up all night without having had my proper rest in the day-time."

Abby opened his eyes and stared earnestly, beseechingly, at Brenda.

She leaned down over him, knowing that he wished to speak to her ear alone.

"Couldn't you stay for a bit?" he whispered. "Just to be in the room?"

3

And that, it seemed, was all that he desired from her for the present. He had no confidences to make, no needs to express, no wish to talk, or indeed to do anything but lie perfectly still. He did not even wish to smoke. But his glance implored her to be with him, "just to be in the room," as he had said, whenever she could. A look of relief thanked her when she entered, and when she went out the professional nurse noticed the deepening of that sad, determined line about the corners of his mouth, and sometimes wondered how old he was.

She was a brown-haired, buxom young woman of thirty or so, with large, white, capable hands, and she devoted herself diligently not only to nursing him back to health, but also to the effort to make his appearance accord more nearly with his surroundings. She shaved him, cut his nails, pumice-stoned his fingers, and achieved some sort of orderly arrangement in the brushing of his hair. And as Abby himself, though he silently submitted to these devastating attentions, refused to show any sign of interest, she sought praise and encouragement from Brenda.

"Well, now, Mrs. Wing, you'll confess that he does *look* better this morning," she would say, following that queer professional convention which appears to regard the patient as something between a helpless child and an impersonal object; "more

. . . *comme il faut*." It was her only French phrase, but she was proud of it.

And Brenda, saving herself, cherished her fantasy, and waiting for the time when Abby should show a desire to tell her everything about that Sunday afternoon, inwardly approved the nurse's ministrations, and found it in her heart to wish that Abby could fall in love with her.

"She's just the sort of woman he wants to look after him permanently," she confided to Tristram, "and very nice-looking, don't you think?"

"Oh, yes, I should say so; in that style," Tristram replied, trying to remember if the nurse were dark or fair. "How old is she?"

"About my age, I should think," Brenda said.

Tristram, trying to give his mind to the question, discovered a possible objection. "But is she the least likely to fall in love with *him*?" he asked.

"She mothers him," Brenda explained.

"Not quite the same thing as wanting to marry him, though, is it?" Tristram said.

"Sometimes," Brenda said, and added enigmatically, "for that kind of woman."

It was another consoling fantasy to add to her explanation of the tragedy, a possible way out into a future for Abby that otherwise seemed to her terrifyingly blank. For she had a strong intuition that for a long time he would not paint again, and if his Art were taken from him, what remained but some form of self-destruction?

And why shouldn't he, if not exactly fall in love with that nice, practical, capable woman, at least

allow himself to be permanently looked after by her? She would do it so well and demand so little from him in return—just so much admiration and, well, fondness as he could spare. Surely it would be easy for him to be fond of a woman like that? Her very name invited fondness, a soft, affectionate, inviting, gentle name, Millicent Foster.

Brenda watched him anxiously when Nurse Foster ministered to him in her presence, but Abby gave no sign of any desire other than his wish to be left alone, and, as often as might be, have Brenda herself in the room with him.

The splint had been taken off his wrist, the swelling had nearly subsided, and his hand did not seem to pain him. He could use it without wincing. There was no other symptom that could be diagnosed. His temperature remained steady at a shade below normal, and he ate moderately, if without appetite. But he displayed an extraordinary lassitude, would not speak to any one if he could possibly avoid it, and refused to take the least interest in anything that was said or offered to him. All day he lay very still, either with his eyes closed or staring up at the ceiling, wrapped, it seemed, in profound meditation, and manifesting no evidence of regard for the world about him, save by the hardening of those new lines about his mouth when Brenda left the room.

“He has had, of course, a great nervous shock,” Dr. Moulton repeated to Tristram and Brenda, not in the patient’s presence, “a very terrible shock. And, perhaps, the best possible cure for him is the

one he seems to have prescribed for himself—absolute rest. There's nothing of him, of course, physically, but, as I've said before, a remarkable fund of shall we say, 'spiritual' vitality. Perhaps, if this inertness continues much longer, it would be well to take other advice?"

"He wants rousing, you know," Nurse Foster confided to Brenda in the course of a secret conference they held together. "But the trouble is, of course, to know how it ought to be done. I've tried reading to him, a nice, bright, amusing book I had with me, but I really couldn't say if he was interested. I've wondered, perhaps, if *you* couldn't read to him, too, for a bit. He always cheers up a little when you're there."

Brenda promised to try what her reading would do for him. She knew that she had other resources which would rouse him more surely if she cared to display them, but she said nothing of those to Nurse Foster. Presently would be time enough.

She gave her earnest attention to the question of what, in the circumstances, she could best read to Abby, before she chose Kipling's Jungle Books. All those stories, she decided, were "safe" (a word that she glanced at and accepted, but did not define), and if he did not know them too well, could hardly fail to interest him.

When she announced her intention of reading to him, and submitted the book, Abby's look of gratitude made superfluous the "Please" that he volunteered in addition.

"He has been distinctly better to-day," explained Nurse Foster, an interested witness of the experiment.

She was leaning over the mahogany panel at the foot of the bed, her arms crossed, looking, as Brenda thought, particularly charming.

Abby, after one glance at her, nevertheless closed his eyes.

"Well, I'm leaving you in good hands," Nurse Foster continued brightly, "and Mrs. Wing says that I can go to the Harvest Thanksgiving. She'll stay with you till I come back. Very likely the reading will send you to sleep for a bit."

Abby gave no sign of having heard her.

As soon as she had gone to put on her cloak and bonnet, Brenda begun to read, but when Nurse Foster had finally left them alone together, she paused and said :

"Nice person, isn't she ? "

"Lord ! " Abby murmured under his breath, and then added quite clearly, " Don't try to talk to me. Read ! I don't want to talk ; not yet. "

" No, not yet, perhaps not ever ! " ran the steady current of Brenda's thought, as she read as brightly and interestingly as she was able of Mowgli and the Jungle. There were so many things that could not even be thought about, much less spoken ; things such as her own feeling of sick repulsion at the suggestion that she should attend the Harvest Festival.

All the others had gone, Tristram, apparently convinced that his example was more important on

this occasion than his annoyance with the Orpins ; Miss Ingleby and the two children (Mary violently refused to be omitted, but had given solemn promise of good behaviour), and more than half of the Hall's domestic staff. But there had been something that Brenda, herself, could not face. It might have been the tedious familiarity of it all, or the sombre confinement on that bright afternoon. A woman had queer fancies at these times. In any case, it was absurd to suppose that it could have been the fear of seeing a group of young men who now and again came to service on Sunday evening, sat at the very back of the nave, and behaved abominably.

She had had her excuse. Nurse wanted to go, and some one must stay with Abby. Also, she had promised to read to him.

She found that although she had continued to read aloud, she had no idea what she had been reading about. Some control in her had taken charge of that immensely complicated function of translating printed letters into spoken words, while her thoughts had been engaged upon quite another pursuit.

" I'm sorry," she said. " I'm afraid I wasn't thinking what I was doing. Was I reading abominably ? "

" No ! Go on," Abby replied quietly.

Brenda continued her reading with determinedly renewed attention. There were so many things that she did not want to think about, just now.

It was twenty minutes to five before Abby spoke again.

"She's coming back," he said suddenly in the middle of a sentence, which the tired Brenda was doing her best to read intelligently. "I heard her voice in the avenue. Will you read to me again to-morrow?"

"Of course I will," she said, thankfully closing her book. "Shall you remember where I left off?"

"Doesn't matter," Abby murmured.

"Is there any other book you'd sooner have?" she asked.

"Anything," he said. "It doesn't matter what."

Brenda realised that this was talking, the kind of talk that was better avoided.

She, too, could now hear the voice of Nurse Foster. It was a pity that she had not a better voice.

"Very well," she said. "I'll read to you again, to-morrow. The Jungle Book or something else."

"Thanks. You'd better go now," Abby returned. "I'll pretend to be asleep when she comes in."

Whatever Nurse Foster's feelings might be, there could be no question, Brenda was afraid, of Abby's.

It was a relief to meet Tristram and the children on the doorstep, a relief to hear the report of Mary's ill-behaviour. She had, it appeared, been allowed to sit at the end of the pew, next to her father, and at some time during the service had succeeded in reaching a magnificently large apple that had been on the top of an oblation of fruit and vegetables piled against the unused door of the North aisle. Tristram had been guilelessly unaware of

all that was going on, until Miss Ingleby had signalled to him, in the middle of the sermon, that Mary was no longer visible. He had then discovered her on the floor of the pew, half under the seat. She had made great progress with the apple by that time.

Mary, who attentively watched her mother's face during the recital of the charge, was evidently reassured by what she saw there, for at the close she smiled and said gleefully, "We left what was left under the seat. Daddy didn't know what to do with it. Was quite a big bit left."

"But I really think——" Miss Ingleby began.

"No, no; she was too young. We ought not to have let her go," Brenda replied. "But as a punishment, she shan't be allowed to go to another Harvest Festival for a whole year."

Mary, missing the point of the joke, looked a little doubtful, but Elise clapped her hands and exclaimed, "But there won't *be* another till next year, mummy."

Brenda happily embraced them both, smiling over their heads at Tristram. This was her life; all the life she wanted. This and the promise of a son was all that she could ever wish for.

"I suppose there was no other bad behaviour?" she asked.

"Oh, no, Elise behaved beautifully," Miss Ingleby said.

"Ah, yes, Elise!" Brenda commented. She had not been thinking of Elise when she asked the question.

4

Sunday had come round again. A whole week had passed since the catastrophe, and as yet Abby had not roused himself. All the swelling had gone from his wrist ; he exhibited no symptoms of illness ; but still he lay plunged in that vast abstraction, immensely detached from the world about him, and speaking only when it was absolutely necessary.

Every afternoon Brenda read aloud to him, but it was evident to her that he took in nothing of what she read. He was not attending to that, but to his own thoughts, whatever they might be. The day before, she had experimented by missing out words, making nonsense of what she read, without changing the tone or rhythm of her voice, and he had made no comment, given no sign that he was aware of what she was doing. It was not the distraction of any story that he needed, but the consciousness that she was sitting beside him, that and the sound of her voice. If she had read the Greek Testament to him it would have served equally well.

On that Sunday she had left him at half-past four and gone out alone into the park with some vague purpose, as she not too definitely persuaded herself, of facing the situation. She had thought of going down again to the fatal bridge, daring herself to make an honest inquiry by re-picturing the scene that had preceded the tragedy. She had

believed that if she surrendered herself to her surroundings in that place, so soaked and impregnated, as it were, by the influence of Abby, all the truth would come to her.

But she had gone no farther than the clearing made by the nine elm trees when they had crashed in the great gale. She had turned then to look back at the house, and had become suddenly lost in abstraction. The shadow of the tall poplar was standing again by the side of the morning-room window, standing a little higher, she thought, than when she had last looked at it.

The autumn was coming. Soon this prolonged drought would break. The leaves would begin to fall, and eddy about the drive, whirled by the first breaths of the damp south-west wind ; dancing in the face of the death the rain was bringing to them. And day by day the shadow would grow until some time in November—they had never been able to determine the exact date—it would be merged into the darkness of the early winter sunset. After that, the winter itself, the leaping shadows of wood-fires within, and without the exhilaration of roaring winds or the still brightness of frost. Until the shadow of the poplar returned in February, harbinger of the sweetness of damp woods stirring with life on a day of sudden warmth ; of snowdrops seen against black earth ; of the increasing day, with the windows of the Hall flung wide to gather the incense of Spring. And then the fullness of new life, flowers and young green in the garden, and the infant at her breast, delicate

and fragrant, taking his part in the wonderful, mystical movement and rhythm of growth . . . of growth and change. . . .

She had a slight feeling of resentment when she saw Nurse Foster in her cap and apron coming to meet her along the avenue.

"I thought I'd just like to speak to you a minute, Mrs. Wing," nurse said. "Isn't it extraordinary how the weather holds? I saw you from the window, and as he's asleep, I thought I'd take the opportunity while I could get you all to myself."

"Is it—anything serious?" Brenda asked.

"Well, I'm beginning to be rather afraid that it *is*, Mrs. Wing," Nurse Foster began. "You see——"

"Do you mind if we sit down first?" Brenda interrupted her. "I'm a little tired. There are some chairs on the bottom lawn; we shall be out of earshot of the house there."

She was to have no peace yet; no time for relaxation in the comfort of her lovely home. However great her need for that tranquillity which was essential for the well-being of herself and the new life, she must first face the spectre that she had allowed to intrude into her paradise of content.

Six weeks ago she had welcomed it as the great spirit of creation, of progress, of inspiration; the divine breath without which life would lapse into uniformity and ultimately decay; as the Other Thing, the eternal effort of enlightenment from outside, the supreme impulse that perpetually essayed to lift and transmute all material things. To-day,

she was a different woman. She had—momentarily perhaps—lost all desire for knowledge of that mystical impulse which meant unceasing strife, a fierce and untiring effort to master the weakness of the flesh. All that side of her had, perhaps, been merged into her own supreme, creative function.

“You mean, nurse?” she said when they had seated themselves on the lawn.

Nurse Foster slightly pursed her firm, well-shaped mouth. “I mean, Mrs. Wing,” she said, “that if we don’t make some effort to rouse him, he may, well, he may just drop out, you know. I had a case not unsimilar, a couple of years ago, though that was, to be sure, a woman. One might say that she just pined away, though there was really nothing, from a medical point of view, the matter with her; which is the case with Mr. Mattocks, because although he’s hardly more than a bag of bones, as you may say, there’s no sign of any *disease*, organic or otherwise.”

“But how can one give him back his wish to paint?” Brenda asked. “You know that was all he really cared for before . . . before this accident happened.”

“I’ve never quite understood how——” Nurse Foster began.

“None of us have,” Brenda said quickly. “It’s impossible to find out until he tells us himself, and, up to now, I haven’t dared to ask him.”

“I think he ought to be asked,” Nurse Foster replied firmly. “If he could get it all out, he’d be better.”

"You haven't tried, yourself?" Brenda inquired.

"Well, you see, Mrs. Wing," was nurse's answer, "he, unfortunately, doesn't like me. I've made allowances, knowing it's all part of his condition, but it's the fact, and he's never tried to hide it. It's a great pity, of course, because it makes it so much more difficult for me to do him any good. I've felt again and again in my experience that sympathy between nurse and patient is half the battle, and I'm not at all sure that it wouldn't be better if I gave up the case, if only for his sake."

Brenda shook her head. "He'd be just the same with any one," she said.

"Except you, of course. But then, I suppose you've known him all his life?"

Brenda realised that it was Millicent Foster who had asked that question. "Hardly as long as that," she said with a smile. "We've been trying to look after him."

"He wants some one to look after him," Miss Foster replied, and there was a short silence before nurse said briskly:

"But truly, Mrs. Wing, I think something ought to be done to rouse his interest again. It isn't the first time I've nursed what you may call a mental case, and that's always the difficulty—to give them a real interest."

"He only has one—his Art," Brenda replied. "How can we give that back to him?"

"Only by degrees, of course," nurse said. "We must begin with something else. And if you'll

forgive my saying so, Mrs. Wing, there's nobody else but you who can do it."

5

Looking back over her life, Brenda decided, in the first place, that she had never knowingly shirked her responsibilities; in the second, that she had never, until now, had the least wish to shirk them; had never been tried up to the limit, not, indeed, to anywhere near the limit, of her capacity. She had a queer, unreasonable feeling that this was unjust; that she ought to have been prepared for such a trial more gradually.

Nurse Foster had gone back to her patient, apparently satisfied with the assurance that Mrs. Wing "would do what she could." It was, Brenda reflected, a meaningless phrase that had in no way committed her, so far as any one else was concerned. No one but she and Abby could ever know whether she had done all that she could.

That she must do something was all too obvious. She truly believed that she held Abby's frail life in her hands. If she did nothing, he would die, "just drop out," as nurse had said. Yes, that was the right phrase; but where would he fall to when he dropped out of—this?

What, in any case, was she exactly afraid of? Of being committed to looking after Abby for the rest of his life; keeping him there; warming him back to a new zest in his Art; encouraging,

cherishing, protecting him ; giving him her own spirit to live upon ?

Or was it that she was newly afraid of knowledge, the thing she had, so she believed, always so earnestly sought. It seemed an absurd supposition, but wasn't it true that she shrank from knowing the truth of what had happened last Sunday afternoon ? Wasn't it true that her fear of that truth lay before her like a physical threat, a horrible, repulsive shape of evil that she would do anything, almost anything, to avoid.

Six weeks ago she could have faced it bravely enough. Now, everything was against her. It was unfair that the scales should have been so grossly weighted against her. She did not even feel that it was her *duty* to do anything that could possibly interfere with the well-being of the precious life, begotten of love and all holiness, that had been entrusted to her—to her and Tristram.

No ! She would not do all that she could. It **probably** would not be necessary. Abby must pull himself together. She would help him to do that, quite gently, kindly, encouragingly. She would show him that he had something supremely worth living for in his unique gift ; tell him that his Art had been so powerful that even Dr. Moulton had, half-miraculously, understood his picture. And presently he would paint another—perhaps greater still. He could ; she would persuade him that he could, and promise to give him all her encouragement and understanding, and such of her spirit as she had to spare. (Not more than that.) And

there need be no horrible confessions, or, at least, not yet, not for a long time, not, certainly, until after her child was born.

She was still sitting on the lawn, and the shadow of the poplar, moving eastwards and growing taller, pointed now to the window of Abby's room. But it would pass on. Just for a few minutes, it would stand out, hard and clear, pointing like a vast, clumsy finger, and then it would become merged with other shadows, fade out, disappear into the darkness. She would remember that it had pointed; but calmly, remembering it as something that had once interested her but had had little to do with the essentials of her life; a shadow that she had called up out of the mysterious depths of the unknown; that had momentarily threatened her, but had become no more than a memory, whether of warning or promise, grown unimportant, merged with all the other shadows in the shifting pattern of her life. . . .

Yes, she would do that. It was all she could afford to offer him. She would talk to him, instead of reading to him—to-morrow.

XI

ABBY SPEAKS

I

NURSE FOSTER had been sent out for a good long walk.

In Abby's room nothing was changed. He lay, as usual, perfectly still, rigidly separate from the world about him. He manifested no consciousness that this afternoon was to be in any way unlike the four preceding afternoons on which Brenda had read to him.

The windows were wide open, but the outside sun-blinds were down, and the room was serene and cool, shaded from the full blaze of the afternoon yet not cut off from it. The half-light was faintly tinged with green; the high singing of innumerable insects merged into a steady harmony that pulsed as if it had been the sound of wind instruments played monotonously at a great distance; the light breeze entered now and again, softly stirring the sun-blind and bringing the warm fresh scent of flowers. They might have been cloistered in some retreat of the garden itself, wonderfully protected from all petty annoyances.

Brenda had a book open on her knees, but she had not begun to read. She had listened to the

sound of Nurse Foster's departure ; heard the thin crash of her feet upon the gravelled terrace below the window, the remote sound of her voice cheerfully bidding "good-afternoon" to a gardener working on the lawn, and then to the dying rhythm of her footsteps fading imperceptibly till it was drowned in the pulse of the insect chorus and the regular click-clack of the gardener's shears as he trimmed the edge of the grass.

She was afraid of the sound of her own voice. The sounds without the room constituted a kind of perpetual stillness that the intrusion of her own voice, so desperately near and intimate, would immediately shatter. When she spoke, all the peaceful world beyond the shell in which she and Abby were enclosed would instantly vanish.

She laid hold of the covers of her book and firmly closed it with a soft, muffled thud.

"Abby," she said, "this afternoon, I think I would like to talk, if you feel up to it."

For an instant she was aware again of the murmurous garden, and then Abby said very quietly, "I think it's about time."

She had expected either silence or a weak opposition, and there was a hint of consternation in the eagerness with which she plunged into her prepared dissertation.

"You see, Abby," she said, "I don't think it's good for you to lie here doing nothing any longer. I want you to get back your strength and start work again. You know how sure my intuitions are in everything that concerns you, and I feel that you

have a splendid time coming, a time in which you'll do even greater work than—than the very best you've done up to now."

It was not right. She knew it was not right. She had merely flung her words at him as she might have flung a handful of pebbles against a wall. He heard her and rejected all she said, passively allowing her words to fall back, despised and useless.

She must take still another step towards that dangerous edge. She had stumbled and drawn back at the mention of the destroyed picture. That impediment, at least, must be crossed, though it left her unprotected on the verge of the abyss.

"Really, Abby!" she continued. "Yes, I mean it, greater than that picture of the pool, although I do know how great that was—by an accident. I've been waiting to tell you until I thought you could bear it. And you can, now, can't you? Abby, Dr. Moulton, dear blind old Dr. Moulton saw it when it was nearly finished; the—the morning you came up to tell me that you were going to finish it that afternoon. And he understood it; Dr. Moulton actually understood it. He said that although it appeared to be a picture of water and trees, he couldn't help feeling that in some wonderful way it was also a picture of me. I can't tell you how that thrilled me. I knew then how magnificently you must have brought it off. How absolutely you had succeeded. But, Abby, that's not the end. I know it's not the end, just because that—happened to be destroyed . . ."

Not a word was right. Her words fell back at

her feet, like pebbles thrown against a wall. She could see them, fallen in a pattern at her feet ; in the pattern of a foot-print.

There was nothing left. She had fulfilled her promise and had done all she could. Automatically, she opened her book again.

" It seems as if you don't want to talk, after all," she said almost carelessly. " Would you like me to read instead ? "

" I'd prefer to talk," Abby said clearly ; " when you are ready to begin."

She still had time to escape. She was standing on the dizzy edge of that awful gulf, but she could still save herself. Only one way of escape remained—she knew that now, beyond all shadow of doubt—the way of flight. She could get up and leave the room ; leave Abby ; fly from him and from Zeal-Afford ; go up to town, abroad, anywhere away from him, to any place in which she might find peace to fulfil her own proper destiny. What was Abby and his Art to her ? What that moment of ecstasy and self-abnegation on the terrace when she had seemed to be aware of a transcending, supernal life of which this life on earth was but an infinitesimal manifestation ? Her duty called her, nothing could alter that.

" But we'll wait a bit longer if you're afraid," Abby continued.

She knew that that one word was the word of supreme importance. She was afraid. It was useless for her to attempt sophistries about her duty. The clear issue was that she shirked the

hard thing, the great intimidating effort of bending her mind and spirit to the task of comprehension. She preferred the easy way of complacent acceptance. She must at least be honest, and confess that she was afraid.

"I suppose I *am* afraid," she said.

"Of what?" he asked.

"The truth," she said.

He turned on his left side and looked at her. It was the first bodily movement he had made since she had entered the room. "You don't know what happened, then?" he asked.

"No," she said. Even then, she had a wild, desperate hope that after all her own explanation might be the right one.

Abby turned on his back again. "Oh, I see," he remarked. "That does explain things, more or less."

"Explain what?" she asked.

"That ghastly detachment of yours," he said.

Yes, it was coming. All the signs and harbingers she had chosen to misinterpret were forgotten at this first rattle of the wind in the tree tops. Here was the very storm itself already beginning to blow upon her, and soon the elms would go down with a vast rending and crashing. Her book fell softly to the floor, and she let it lie there. She twined her fingers together and bent her head. "But I'm very strong," she repeated over and over again to herself, "tremendously strong." She found consolation in that assurance of her splendid physical strength.

Abby paused reflectively before he continued, "I've been thinking tremendously ever since. You needn't imagine that I've been lying here trying to forget. Rather not; I've been facing it; everything; trying to make some sense out of it,—though I haven't got as far as that, yet,—just sucked the nerve of the hollow tooth hard, and gone on doing it till I got so used to the pain it hardly hurt. I jolly well knew I'd got to do that. I should have gone rotten if I hadn't.

"I'm not saying I didn't want you to talk all that time. Pretty often I did,—badly. But it wasn't any use my beginning till I could really speak to you. Sort of things I had to say couldn't be shouted at you over that woman's head, nor yet when we were alone together; not while you were playing good, kind Mrs. Wing from the Hall. I couldn't help thinking of you like that, you know; wondering if you'd got some sort of mission to protect those darling young men from the village. Save a scandal; that sort of thing. Never struck me you didn't know. That does make a difference, of course. Seems as if I were sucking the wrong tooth, part of the time."

Brenda hid her face. "Oh, Abby, how *could* we know?" she murmured.

"We?" he repeated. "No, *we* couldn't. I thought *you* would. Don't know how. But, good God, what on earth did you suppose *could* have happened?"

She could realise to the full, now, the romantic futility of her own explanation; realise it completely

and utterly in the fact that she was ashamed even to hint at it to him. The fantasy that she had set up as an idol, was seen, now, as the most foolish and unlikely of images, a stupid, childish thing to be thrust quickly and blushing out of sight.

"I don't know," she said. "I thought, perhaps, you——"

"I?" he gave a little snicker of laughter. "I say, you didn't think I'd tried to commit suicide, did you? Oh Lord!"

The contempt in his tone and his laugh galled her. "I'm never quite sure what you'll do," she said.

"Not *now*," he replied bitterly.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked. "I haven't changed. Since when have I changed?"

"Oh, chiefly since . . . whenever it was. I don't know what day of the week it is. The day I got smashed. But we've got to have it all out, you know. Every blessed thing. I've been thinking about that; it was part of the tender tooth business. But you'd better know first just what happened. We can't talk till you know that. You see . . ."

With a quick, strong movement he sat up in bed, and turned to look at her. Every sign of inertia, and indeed of weakness, had disappeared. His expression was one of eager determination, not wholly free, she thought, from a touch of malevolence.

"You see . . ." he repeated, and then his eyes began to search the room. "Do you know, m'dear lady," he said, "I think I'd like to smoke."

She got up and fetched from the mantelpiece a box of his own cheap, Virginia cigarettes that had been brought up with the idea of tempting him to the great task of rousing himself.

She was glad to have this last brief interval in which to prepare herself for some, as yet unknown, effect that would, she knew, be produced by his story. Of the story itself she no longer had much fear. When she had thrust that foolish fantasy of hers out of sight, she had, at the same time, accepted the alternative explanation which some part of her had always known to be true—the very act of accepting it had brought her a vague sense of relief. But she was aware, now, that it was not so much the brutality and horror of the physical outrage that had so immensely intimidated her, as the threat it conveyed of a great consequent disturbance, even the destruction of some personal essence that she had believed to be necessary to her existence.

It was to this mysterious threat that her mind turned with an almost savage intensity, as she deliberately crossed the room, found the cigarettes and matches, and searched absent-mindedly for some saucer or box that would serve for an ash-tray. But she was faced by a sheer blank of darkness, when she attempted by any effort of logic to anticipate the possible effect upon her of his story. She found herself standing, very still, by the

dressing-table, thinking feebly to herself: But what possible effect could it have?

"I was just looking for something that would do for an ash tray," she said aloud.

"Turn the cigarettes out of the box, I'll use that," Abby returned with the readiness of ripe experience.

But though the period of preparation was still a little further prolonged, while he hesitated luxuriously over the delight of his first cigarette after so long an interval, no least gleam of light came to her.

"You see," he began, for the third time, "I'd just finished it, and it was good, m'dear lady, very good. Oh, better by the width of heaven than anything I'd done before. I wouldn't have touched it again to save my soul."

He rested on that for a moment, staring into vacancy, and appearing to savour the "goodness" of that lost picture with the deep inhalation of his cigarette smoke.

"I was standing back from it," he continued, "when they came."

"How many were there?" Brenda put in.

"Four or five. Five, I think," he said.

She sighed deeply, regarding the meagreness of a torso emphasised by the misfit of Tristram's pyjamas.

"Five!" she murmured. One, surely, would have been enough so far as the physical strength needed was concerned; but one, alone, would not have had the courage.

"They sort of got round me," Abby went on

hunching his narrow shoulders ; “ sidled up, you know, and then stood there. Just at first, I thought they’d happened to come that way and had only stopped to look. That didn’t last long, though, because they began to talk to each other and guffaw,—you know that beastly row they make—a beastly, brutish, sottish row ! God, how I loathe it ! And their talk. Eugh ! I can’t imitate it. Asking each other what they thought the picture was meant for, a cow or what. You know the sort of thing.

“ And, Hildegarde ”—he put out his left hand, took hers, and held it tightly as if even in recalling the scene he needed the assurance of protection—“ it’s no good my pretending I was brave or anything. I was just cold and shaking with funk. I daren’t speak. I just stood there, pretending as hard as I could not to take any notice of them, praying like hell for them to go away, trying to kid myself that they didn’t mean to do anything to me, though I just knew they were going to. And then one of them suddenly whacked the picture over with his stick. I did let out a yell, then, but two of ’em got hold of me from behind and one of ’em put his hand over my mouth.

“ I didn’t feel myself fall over the bridge. Funny, that was. I was kicking and struggling and biting like mad, you know, and all of a sudden it seemed, they’d let go and I was in the water. I don’t remember going over, it was just as if the water jumped up and hit me all at once. They were calling out something about ‘ Alice.’ I didn’t

know what they meant ; I don't now. And then they chucked the—the canvas at me and cleared off."

He released her hand as he concluded, and lighted another cigarette from the stump of the old one, which he crushed out on the bottom of the empty cardboard box.

Brenda, her thought still numb, sat perfectly still watching the deft, perfectly controlled movements of his slender hands. There was an independent life in his fingers, as there is in the fingers of the blind. A man could not *fight* with hands like that.

"It's a beastly feeling, that feeling of utter funk," he continued in a more speculative tone. "You know, somehow, that this is the *real thing*, no hope of waking up or making the story end differently, and yet you get that paralysis you have in nightmares. I was sick with it—until they actually began, you know. After that it wasn't so bad, you just lashed out—absolutely useless, of course, but you were doing something.

"Funny thing, you know, Hildegard ; there was one moment, after they'd got me and while I was trying to fight, when I was thinking hard. Not about what I could do to get away, but about life—my life more particularly. And that's what I've been leading up to. It's the point of the whole business, that was why I had to tell you all about it. Couldn't have made you understand if I hadn't. . . .

"I've never told you, have I, about the time

when I first heard that my mother was really my step-mother, and all her beastly children only my half-brothers and sisters? You see, I was most frightfully bucked to know that. It was just as if I'd been dragging a filthy great weight about with me, and some one had suddenly taken it off. I felt free all at once. I knew I could snap my fingers then at the lot of 'em.

"Well, I was thinking of that when these swine were pitching me over the bridge. Rum thing to think of then, wasn't it? I was thinking that a chap of my sort couldn't ever be free while there were so many dirty roughs about the place. 'Tisn't only these mucky villagers, either, m'dear lady. Rather not. It's the whole lusty, hulking crowd of the Philistines. They're too bloody strong for us. The proper uniform for the rulers of this world is corduroy and hob-nails. If you want to get on, you must be ruthless and cruel; have good hard muscles and a good thick skin; never care a damnation curse what you do or how you do it, so long as it comes off. That's the only sort of freedom there is. Brute strength in some form or another is the thing that counts."

3

She wanted to protest vehemently. She knew that what he had said was at best but a half-truth. He was, himself, a ruthless egotist and was suffering fiercely from the degradation that had been thrust

upon him. To justify himself he had to despise those who had misused him. But she could not protest because in doing that she would have to acknowledge that her whole philosophy of conduct had been shattered.

"It's terrible, Abby, terrible," she said. "But, oh, let me think a minute. Let me think!"

Abby nodded his acquiescence and sank down again upon the bed. He had begun what he had to say, and he wanted to rest before he came to the great crisis and conclusion that he had not, as yet, foreshadowed. Meanwhile, he was glad to smoke in silence for a few minutes.

Brenda got up and went over to the window, a passage that translated her from the savage influence of Abby's overwhelming personality into the sweet temperance of her own world. From there, she could look down under the sun-blind at the orderly freshness of the flower bed on the farther side of the terrace; could hear again the rhythmic pulsing of the insect chorus and the distant obbligate of the gardener's shears; could plunge herself into that sense of peaceful, sustaining beauty that had been the constant background of her life since she had married Tristram.

Yet it was possible that all that sweetness might become a reproach to her. She saw it now as a temptation to which she had yielded without a single effort of resistance, snared in the happy tangle of that comforting philosophy of hers.

How easy it had been for her, how soothing, to avoid all the cutting edges of the monkey-puzzle

that had so perplexed Tristram, simply by letting people alone! "Every one," she had declared, "has a perfect right to his own opinions; why should I try to make them think as I do about things?" She had believed that; truly she had believed that. But could she have believed it if she had taken the trouble to think a little deeper?

Had those five roughs a right to mishandle that fragile thing on the bed, to destroy, with a coarse guffaw, a unique work of genius? Was brutality to be allowed to rule the world of sensibility, while she stood on one side, relieved of all responsibility, by the smug robe of her creed? Had her philosophy, indeed, from the very outset, been anything more than a means of refuge from the strife and perplexity of trying to solve the great puzzle as a whole?

Still standing by the window, she turned and faced the bed.

"I grant you that there's some truth in all that you've been saying, Abby," she said, "but, of course, it's a gross over-statement."

He sat up again with an effect of eagerness, incidentally knocking over the box he was using as an ash-tray.

"Perhaps you'd be inclined to over-statement, too, m'dear lady," he replied, "if you'd been handled as I was."

She came a little nearer to him, and stood by the bed with one hand resting on the massive mahogany post at the foot.

"Well, haven't I?" she asked. "Haven't I

had all my cherished illusions shattered, something of my life-work brutally destroyed? "

" I don't follow that," he said, his expression changing to that pathetic, half-beseeching stare which always reminded Tristram of an all-too-human monkey.

" You've shattered my philosophy, Abby," she explained. " You know how I've always said people had a right to their own opinions? Well, you've provided me with an exception. I deny the rights of those village louts, deny them passionately. I want to horse-whip the brutes. I do. I do."

Abby righted the cigarette box, but not quite in time to catch the long ash of his cigarette. " It's no good trying to get a philosophy that'll work in every case, Hildegarde," he said. " There isn't one. They all leak when you try to fill 'em too full. I chucked all the philosophies, years ago. With Art you know more or less where you are. There's no hair-splitting logic about Art, and you can't explain it. All the people who call themselves critics,—rotten lot of idiots,—have tried to, and all they've done is to prove what bloody fools they are."

With a faint shock of surprise, Brenda realised that this, after all, was what she had come there to talk about. It was as if, in new country, she had taken an immense exploring walk and had unexpectedly found herself back again at the familiar starting point.

" But, Abby," she said, " if you still feel like

that, why wouldn't you listen to me, just now, when I talked to you about wanting to paint again?"

"Because I don't think," Abby returned with a solemn deliberation, "I don't think, Hildegarde, that I shall ever paint again."

"Why not?" she asked, trying to conceal her uneasiness.

"No object. Nothing left," he said. "That's what I've been coming to, all along. When that fellow smacked my picture over, something went phut; something in me. I'd done it, you know. Got *you*, there, almost without knowing it. Yes, before God, I don't quite know *how* I did it. It fairly frightened me, that last morning,—the way the thing came, I mean. As if something had got hold of me, and might let go any minute. Only it didn't. Not till I'd finished. I was drunk with inspiration, Hildegarde, and I painted a masterpiece, good enough for any gallery in Europe. And for what? To be trampled and spat upon. Can't you see, my dear, that I could never be content just to *paint* again, after that?"

"That inspiration might return," she tried. "It would be worth living for."

"Look here, m'dear lady," he said, "I've got something else to say. I did begin with, 'I don't *think* I shall ever paint again,' didn't I? But I can't look at you while I'm saying it, or I shall lose my nerve. All this business has knocked me over, most frightfully. So, do you mind coming and sitting down again, and not interrupting me till

I've done, because I've got to get this out. Simply got to. Do you mind?"

She pictured herself sitting there, tortured by the avowal he was about to make, the avowal that she knew now had been inevitable ever since he had kissed her on the terrace. And she knew that she could not endure it.

She would be honest with herself. She was not the sort of woman who could sacrifice everything to an ideal that demanded perpetual strain and effort; a going-out into the barren wilderness in the attempt to recover that effect of selflessness she had once experienced and thought exquisite,—an effect that had probably been due solely to the influence of Abby's fierce personality, and had had no true source in her own spirit.

"Abby," she said very quietly, "there's one thing you don't know, yet, and you had better hear that first. You see, I'm going to have another child."

He looked into her eyes for a moment, and then his attention seemed to slip away from her. He glanced at the open window, from that to the dressing-table, to various objects here and there in that large, splendid room. He might have been idly looking round for something he had mislaid.

"Do you expect me to congratulate you or what?" he mumbled after a silence that had marked an immense change in their relations. Or was it not, rather, as if in that interval time had ebbed, leaving them once again as strangers, and more than a little suspicious of one another, on the

high, dry land over which they had lately been swimming together in such very deep water?

"I feel that I deserve it," she said, returning to the window and looking down at the terrace.

"Like to have an heir, I suppose?" Abby replied. "Thing to do, isn't it, when you're prosperous? I had an heir once, for about twenty-four hours, but I won't tell you the rest of the story. It doesn't go with this room any more than I do."

But what could he possibly have expected her to do? Leave Tristram and the children; go away with him to give him all of herself, body and spirit, in the hope that she might re-inspire him to paint another masterpiece?

The idea would have been farcical in its hopeless absurdity, if she had not been able—almost incomprehensibly as it seemed to her at that moment—to understand him; all his ferocious egotism, the unlimited pride and self-esteem of a genius who is fully aware of his own gift. For him there were no impossibilities, not of that kind. Within his own world, he was a god; and he despised all those who were outside it.

Below her she caught a glimpse of the purple-blue veil of nurse's bonnet, lifting in the wind of her own vigorous progress.

Abby, too, had recognised her step. "She's coming back, isn't she?" he said. "Give her a bit of a shock when she sees this bed."

Brenda turned and looked at the sullied sheet and coverlet, littered and gray with cigarette ends

and ash, but she made no attempt to clear up the mess.

"Doesn't matter," she murmured with a mechanical smile.

"Oh, and look here," Abby said, hurriedly passing on to another topic. "I'd like to get back to town as soon as I can. When do you think I could go? To-morrow?"

"Hardly as soon as that," she replied quietly. "You might, perhaps, get up to-morrow, but I don't think you ought to travel before Thursday or Friday."

"What is it, to-day?" he asked.

"Monday," she told him.

"I'll be able to travel by Thursday," he said decidedly. "It isn't as if I've been ill, really. All that I've been suffering from was delusions, and that's a chronic disease with me. I'm no sooner over one attack than I begin to sicken for the next. Though, I rather fancy, that on this occasion——"

His prophecy was cut short by the entrance of nurse.

She stood for a moment on the threshold of the door, her eyebrows raised in mock astonishment.

"Well!" she ejaculated, looking from Abby to Brenda and back again. "This is a surprise."

"Life's full of surprises, m'dear lady," Abby said with a grin.

"And, my goodness, what a mess you've got yourself into!" Nurse Foster added, as she came forward into the room.

"Habit of mine," Abby explained.

"And he talks of going back to London on Thursday," Brenda put in.

Nurse Foster had already taken off her gloves and was rapidly tidying up the bed. "Oh, well, we'll see about that," she commented briskly. "No! Give me the end of that cigarette. You're certainly not going to smoke another before tea. Goodness! How many have you smoked already? There are five, six, ends in the box, now. And why you didn't use that beautiful, big china ash-tray I left for you on the mantelpiece, I can't think."

"I looked for it and couldn't find it," Brenda put in, looking back for a moment into that strange dream past in which she had seemed to be sinking in such very deep water.

Nurse Foster straightened her back and raised her eyebrows.

"Well!" she ejaculated for the second time, her eyes on the blue china bowl, almost ostentatiously displayed on the mantelpiece.

"But I did succeed in rousing him!" Brenda said.

Abby was lying back on his pillows, his hands clasped under his head, his face wrinkled into a sardonic grin, as if, grimly amused, he planned some subtle scheme of mischief.

"Oh, I'm fairly roused, now," he said.

XII

NOLI ME TANGERE

I

THE Fullertons had not, after all, left Zeal-Afford that morning. Fullerton having submitted, there was no reason why his wife should take him away so suddenly, more particularly as she had no wish to go back to town in the middle of September, and had nowhere to go before the following Friday. She had been quite gracious to everybody that morning, magnanimously willing to forgive the accomplices in the plot that had been attempted against her.

And it was to escape her father and mother that Brenda, having found Tristram when she came downstairs, took him out to sit with her under the big tree on the lawn behind the house. She had no associations with that place other than with Tristram himself; and, there, she hoped to be reasonably free from interruption.

She held his hand as she led him across the lawn, and retained it when they were seated under the sycamore. She came to him for strength and support now, as Abby had come to her an hour earlier. Tristram was so straight and strong and clean, so dependable and so generous.

"Darling, you haven't been overtiring yourself with this fellow?" he asked tenderly, when Brenda, having sunk into the low basket chair, claimed his hand again and twined her fingers into his.

"Yes, I have," she said with a smile of reassurance. "But it's done with, now. He wants to go away; soon—Thursday, if possible."

"Does he, by jove?" Tristram's surprise contained, also, the hint of suspicion. "Why?"

"Chiefly, perhaps, because I told him—about me—about us and our hopes."

Tristram began to whistle under his breath.

"I knew that he had come to the verge of making a declaration of some sort," she explained, "and that was the quickest way of stopping him."

"Well, I hope he'll be able to go on Thursday," Tristram commented softly. "And, B, I'd really sooner you didn't see much of him before he goes. This does make rather a difference, doesn't it? It does show in a way, too, that the Orpins and the rest of 'em weren't so very wrong about *him*, after all."

She made no reply to that. She was leaning right back in her chair, looking up into his eyes and keeping a very tight grip of his hand.

"Shaken you up rather, hasn't it?" Tristram inquired anxiously.

"Not that," she said. "I've realised all the possibilities in that way ever since he came back. All it means, now, is that I can't help him any more—and he knows it. No, dear, it was really

something else altogether that I wanted to tell you, but you had to know that first. It was that——”

She hesitated, not so much because she feared to revive her memory of the outrage as because she felt a strange shyness in confessing her own change of attitude. It was as if, she whimsically reflected, she had to introduce a very young and inexperienced Brenda to him after all these years, take herself by the hand, lead herself up to him, and say, “Oh, Tristram, I don’t think you know this side of me. She’s very gauche and rather childish at present, but I think you ought to make her acquaintance.”

He might not like her !

“Yes, dear,” he prompted her gently.

“Tristram, he told me this afternoon,” she began, “how it happened, the accident and all that, last Sunday week. And it wasn’t the least like my explanation of it. Not the least.”

Tristram frowned uneasily. “You know, old girl, I had a sort of feeling from the beginning that it wasn’t,” he said. “But I thought I’d better leave it alone. I didn’t want to worry you about it. But I say, what did happen ? ”

“Roughs from the village,” she explained briefly.

“Oh, the devil ! ” he commented, and then, “What’s to be done about it ? ”

“What do *you* think ought to be done ? ” she asked.

“Make the very hell of a row,” he said. “You see, B, this is what comes of letting people alone. They go on getting worse and worse.”

"They?" she put in.

"Well, old girl, you don't mean to tell me that the youth of the village did this on their own? Some one must have put 'em up to it; egged 'em on somehow. It's a pretty serious offence, and they know it, to come on to my land, smash up the valuable property of some one who is staying here as my guest and half-kill that person himself. We could give them a month for that, without the option. Well, I put it to you, that they must have been pretty well worked up to take a risk like that. I don't suppose for a minute that the Orpins were the actual instigators, but they've probably gone on talking scandal about you and Abby, and rousing up a lot of bad feeling, and so on, till it came to this. By Gad, old girl, I do really feel that something ought to be done about it. What did he say? Abby, I mean. Was he sore with *us* about it?"

Brenda shook her head. "Oh, no!" she said. "Nothing of that sort." Between Abby's point of view and Tristram's, there was a gulf that no words could bridge.

"All the same, I do feel rather, in a sense, responsible," Tristram went on. "But I suppose you think that——"

"No, I don't," she interrupted him; and then seeing the surprise in his face, she continued quickly, "Tristram, I'm not sure that I've been right all this time, about not interfering, or—or preaching to other people. This affair has shaken me up, terrifically. I've felt that perhaps if I hadn't

been so—so detached and careless, this might have been prevented, that it is partly my fault that it happened.”

“Oh, no, rather not, old girl,” he assured her warmly, but he was looking very thoughtful.

“I’m angry now, you see, dear,” she continued. “Angry that those louts should have wantonly destroyed a beautiful thing such as that picture. I want to avenge that.”

“And I want to avenge a still more beautiful thing—you!” Tristram said. “I’m afraid I can’t work up so much indignation about the picture, but this infernal affair brings all the filthy scandal about you to a head. That’s what gets me.”

“Yes, I think I’m beginning to understand,” Brenda remarked after a little pause of deep reflection.

“About what, darling?” Tristram asked.

“About me,” she said. “About this new revengefulness of mine. It isn’t very easy to put, but it seems to me that I could keep up my . . . detachment, for just so long as people’s different opinions and attitudes and so on did not find expression in *action*. It’s at that point that one simply must at least defend oneself.”

“Don’t all opinions that are worth anything find expression in action, sooner or later?” Tristram returned.

“I suppose so. I hadn’t thought of it like that. Oh, I don’t know! I simply *don’t* know!” she lamented. “I’m all raw and new. I’ve got

to begin all over again and I would so very much sooner not. Tristram, darling, I'd like you to do whatever you think best about this affair. And for the present I want you to do all my thinking for me. I'm going to rest. I can't and I won't be bothered any more for the present, with this horrible monkey-puzzle, as you called it. I'm going to devote myself to bringing a son into the world under the best possible conditions, and until that's done I refuse to take the least interest in any one but you ; and Elise and Mary."

"Well, I think you're most awfully right about that, darling old girl," Tristram said. "And you can safely leave everything else to me."

2

The Reverend Sidney Orpin was deeply engaged among the currant-bushes at half-past six that same evening, and his first action when he saw his squire coming up the drive was to bob down out of sight.

He was occupied in an earnest but perfectly futile observation of an abnormal (he insisted on the "abnormal") brood of caterpillars that had appeared in the past few days. He was almost sure that the species was an unusual one, and since life offered no other diversions, he passionately welcomed these entomological excitements. He had a vague hope that the unprecedented drought

might in some strange way be producing an unprecedented butterfly or moth—he was not sure which it was going to be, and he seized every possible opportunity lately, often at some risk of discovery, to watch the progress of these fascinating visitors to his black-currant trees. He was so afraid of their disappearing before they spun, or of so concealing their cocoons that he would not be able to find them. That misfortune had happened to him before, and there could, unfortunately, be little question that each day the numbers of this deeply interesting brood gradually diminished. No doubt the pair of squawking blackbirds he had put up in the neighbourhood that very evening could account for the difference.

Furthermore, Mr. Orpin had other grounds for not wishing to see his squire. As vicar of Zeal-Afford, he deeply regretted the outrage on the bridge, but he did not feel that he could move in the matter. And eight days having passed since the crime had been committed, he had begun to hope that the Hall either did not know what had happened (the painter-fellow, so the vicarage housemaid had cheerfully reported to Mrs. Orpin, was still as good as unconscious), or had decided, very wisely, to take no further notice.

Wherefore the vicar ducked and waited, contemplating a strategic retreat by the back gate as soon as the squire turned the corner of the drive.

Unhappily the squire did not turn the corner. His steps paused at the wire arch that made a pretence of cutting off the kitchen from the flower

garden, and the vicar became shamefully aware that he must have been seen and was now most embarrassingly being waited for.

He raised himself slowly, and keeping his back to the arch, devoted himself to an elaborate inspection of nothing in particular. His start of surprise when Tristram hailed him, was, however, uncommonly well done, because although he had expected to be hailed, he was actually thinking of something else when Tristram spoke.

"Hallo! I say, Orpin, can I speak to you for a minute?" was what he had said.

The vicar pivoted with a jerk of annoyance. "Ah! Is that you, Wing?" he said, lowering his head and peering over the top of his spectacles as if he had come across another and exceedingly unwelcome entomological specimen. "Ah! Yes. I'll come out."

An undignified and embarrassing position, and there seemed to be no explanation for it but that truth which in this connection he so discreetly guarded.

"Some rather curious caterpillars on the currants," he said as he stepped on to the path. "I didn't see you coming."

"They're all over everything. It's the drought," Tristram replied curtly. He knew that the vicar had seen him on the drive. What a dishonest old humbug he was, and how shamefully anxious to shirk his duties!

The vicar nodded, feeling that that incident could now be safely dismissed—and the curious

caterpillars left to the blackbirds. But it was getting late. They probably would not come back this evening. If he could find some excuse to get up early the next morning? And perhaps rig up some kind of a net, without saying anything to Miles, who, as a mere gardener, could not be expected to understand the protection of what he regarded solely as a pest. . . .

The vicar was startled for the second time in three minutes by the sound of his squire's voice.

"A very serious breach of the peace has come to my notice, Orpin," he was saying. "I heard of it only an hour ago, although it happened a week last Sunday, and I cannot possibly let it go by. You are probably still unaware, as I was until just now, that a party of roughs from the village set upon one of my guests, on the bridge by the Home Farm, hurt him severely, and destroyed a very valuable work of art?"

The vicar decided that it would be foolish to pretend ignorance of an event that had been the talk of the whole village for eight days. "I heard something. I heard something," he said. "Ah, perhaps we had better go into my study, before we say any more . . . in case . . . ah . . ."

They were already at the vicarage porch, and he hurried on into the house without completing his sentence. In his own study, seated behind his desk, he would feel safer.

"You say that you'd heard of this outrage?" his persecutor began again almost before he had had time to sit down.

"Something ; something," he acknowledged. "It has been, I regret to say, talked about in the village. The whole thing is, of course, intensely regrettable. No one more sorry about it all than we are."

"And what have you done about it ?"

An absurd question, particularly when posed with that half-magisterial air of cross-examination to a man nearly twice his age.

"My dear Wing, there's nothing to be *done*," he protested. "I should have thought that you would have realised——"

"Do you know the blackguards' names ?"

"No, no. None of them." This was surely an occasion upon which a rather glaring mis-statement was permissible. The man was so dreadfully sore at present, that he could not even see in what direction his own interests lay. The best thing to do was to get rid of him as soon as possible.

"And you've made no effort to find out ?"

"I thought it advisable, on every account, to let the whole matter severely alone."

"Good God, Orpin ! Why ?"

"Really, Wing, I must leave that to your good sense," the vicar said brusquely. It was intolerable to be cross-questioned like this. "And I may as well say at once that I refuse absolutely to be mixed up in the matter, in any way. I have told you that I do not know the names of those who were—er—inculcated, and I have no intention of—er—trying to find out. . . ."

That was the hall door, which meant that his wife had come in from the village. She might come

straight to his study ; she often did, just to see that he was not " pottering about the garden." Very queer that she seemed to object to that—when there was so often really nothing else to do. But, to-day, he would be glad if she did come. Wing was obviously in a funny temper, and Mrs. Orpin had a very powerful intuitive gift for the right way of putting things. She was much better able to deal with this matter than he was.

3

On this occasion Mrs. Orpin did go straight to her husband's study. She wanted to tell him privately that there could not now be any doubt of that horrible artist's attempted misdemeanour in the matter of Mary Tebbitt's little Alice, and that if the Hall, even at this late hour, did have the bad taste to make a fuss. . . .

She was, however, taken aback for a moment when she found herself so suddenly confronted with " the Hall " itself.

" I'm sorry ; I didn't know you were here, Mr. Wing," she apologised. " Am I interrupting you ?"

" Not at all, my dear,—not at all," her husband said. " I was just telling Mr. Wing that we really knew nothing at all about that affair, of last Sunday week, you know, and positively refused to be mixed up in it, in any way."

Mrs. Orpin suffered a quick spasm of impatience at her husband's ineptness. It was true that he

did not know how splendidly prepared she was to meet and confound any complaints that might be brought by Mr. or Mrs. Wing. But that speech was so terribly characteristic of his usual inertness. His one idea was to avoid a fuss, by doing nothing, an evasion that was unworthy of any person of spirit, to say nothing of a priest of the Church *militant*. And then, the utter absurdity of saying that they knew nothing at all about that affair, when, indeed, they knew, if anything, a great deal too much.

She set her lips and looked boldly at Tristram, a nice man in many ways and remarkably good-looking, but a perfect fool wherever that immodest wife of his was concerned.

"Of course, as my husband truly says, Mr. Wing," she said, "that horrible affair is no concern of ours, and we have refused as far as possible to take any notice of it, because we have felt that as the people most injured have taken the law into their own hands, the best thing we could do would be to let the whole thing drop as soon as possible, any further action now having become, from one point of view, superfluous. Also, we have naturally been influenced by the fact that the person chiefly concerned is, we understand, still keeping his bed, and will, we presume, leave the parish as soon as ever he is able to go, since we cannot believe that even Mrs. Wing's infatuation with his—well, with his painting, of which we can't pretend to be any judge, would permit her to keep him in the place after what he had done."

"Done?" repeated Tristram mechanically, completely staggered for the moment by this furious frontal attack. "I'm afraid I don't follow you, Mrs. Orpin. What do you, or rather, what do the village gossips, insinuate that Mr. Mattocks has done?"

"Unfortunately, Mr. Wing, it is *not* a question of village gossip nor of insinuation," Mrs. Orpin replied, dropping her voice and lowering her eyes.

This was going to be a delicate matter to handle and complicated by the fact that the best she could hope from the vicar was that he would keep quiet and not show any surprise. Surely he would have sense enough for that? At present, he was sitting very still with his head bent and a grieved expression on his face that would do well enough, if only he wouldn't ask *her* any questions. It would be better, perhaps, to inculcate him from the beginning.

"Because, as my husband can tell you, Mr. Wing," she continued, "we have the evidence of the poor little child, herself, who, although she won't be fourteen till next month, is quite old enough to realise what his horrible intention might have been if she hadn't succeeded in tearing herself away from him."

Tristram shook his head. "I assure you, Mrs. Orpin," he said, "that I have not the least conception of what you are talking about. What child?"

"Alice Tebbitt," Mrs. Orpin replied firmly.

Up to now the vicar had taken it all admirably, and he was stooping so far forward that his face

was almost invisible. But she guessed by the slight trembling of his head that that absurd scrupulousness of his, which was always manifested on the most inopportune occasions, might prompt him at any moment to question the nature of the evidence she had adduced.

"Yes, Alice Tebbitt," she repeated quickly, "and her mother, as I suppose you know, Mr. Wing, has lived a very decent and proper life ever since the child was born. And Alice, herself, is as charming a little creature as you could hope to find."

"But what has this to do with Mr. Mattocks?" Tristram inquired, still perplexed, but with a very uneasy suspicion beginning to stir in his mind.

Mrs. Orpin pinched her mouth a little tighter, and kept her eyes modestly on the ground. The vicar was, apparently, going to be sensible for once.

"You and Mrs. Wing take so little interest in the life of the village," she said, "or you would have heard all about it for yourselves. Indeed, as it is, I'm astonished that no whisper of it has come to you, though it is true that neither the vicar nor I had any suspicion of the *true* state of the case till last Monday. Even then, we couldn't believe, at first, that even so Bohemian and, from our point of view, I must say, so very undesirable a person as this painter friend of Mrs. Wing's, would be quite so wicked as to—to make advances to a child of thirteen. It's really too disgusting, altogether."

"But are you sure——?" Tristram began.

"Quite sure," Mrs. Orpin said.

Tristram looked at the vicar, but the vicar had now hidden his face in his hands.

"Go into the village yourself, Mr. Wing, and ask any one you chance to meet. *Any one!*" Mrs. Orpin concluded decisively.

"But it's incredible," Tristram said.

Mrs. Orpin shrugged her shoulders. "I am not asking you to take *my* word for it, Mr. Wing," she reminded him.

She could see the perplexity and trouble on his face. He was obviously shaken, aroused, perhaps, she thought, for the first time to a true suspicion of the unspeakable nastiness of that disgusting protégé—or whatever he was—of his wife's.

It is possible that in the secret places of her mind, Mrs. Orpin was not quite so convinced as she would have liked to have been of the truth of the story she had been telling. There had been glaring discrepancies of time and place in the various versions of it that had been somewhat too eagerly presented to her, and the uneasy affirmations of little Alice in answer to a string of suggestively-phrased leading questions had not been very convincing. But this was not the time to sift evidence, while it certainly was a most favourable moment finally to open the eyes of this poor deluded man to all the deceits that had been practised upon him.

Wherefore, after a brief pause, during which Tristram was still visibly engaged in wrestling

with his doubts, Mrs. Orpin continued in a more friendly tone, "I can assure you, Mr. Wing, that nobody could be more grieved than my husband and myself by all that has happened, and you must at least do us the justice to remember how we begged you, five or six weeks ago now, not to let this Mr. Mattocks stay at the cottage. But it does seem so very plain that the only thing to do, now, is to send him away as soon as ever he is able to move, in the hope that it will all blow over."

"He's going, Thursday, I expect," Tristram put in.

The vicar looked up, made a noise indicative of relief, and slightly pushed back his chair as if he thought this a favourable opportunity to close the interview. But his wife had not quite finished yet.

"I'm sure that's wise," she said, "because the feeling is very bitter against him in the village, and the least thing is taken hold of now and used in the most dangerous way. One can't, try as one will, altogether close one's ears to these things, and I know that there was a good deal of talk when everybody from the Hall, *except* Mrs. Wing and Mr. Mattocks, came to the Harvest Festival. I'm not saying, for one moment . . ."

But whatever it was that she was not about to say, Tristram evidently had no wish to hear, for not only did he get up and leave the room without another word to either of them, but, also, there was something in the manner of his going that left them with the certainty that the breach between

Hall and Vicarage had now been widened beyond all hope of bridging.

"Hm! hm! I think, my dear, that perhaps you went a little too far, eh? about the Harvest Festival?" Mr. Orpin mumbled apologetically.

"The man's a perfect fool," his wife replied with an emphasis that brooked no denial.

The vicar scratched his chin.

"And there can be no possible doubt that the story about that disgusting creature and little Alice Tebbitt is perfectly true," Mrs. Orpin added.

"I've seen the poor child herself."

"Dear, dear! Very distressing, and a great pity altogether; a very great pity," the vicar thought.

"And though the poor fool may try to take the high hand with every one," Mrs. Orpin concluded, "I fancy he has learnt his lesson. I shouldn't, in fact, be greatly surprised if they had to leave the Hall, after this; and I'm not sure that I should be very sorry."

"It might be better, perhaps, in some ways," the vicar agreed soothingly.

For a moment his thoughts flitted to the question of the squire's "subscriptions," which had always been generous, and then returned gratefully to the reflection that it was certainly too late, now, for the blackbirds to do any harm. To-morrow he must make some excuse to get up early. . . .

4

The village, for once, was "solid" as villages in the West of England can be when they find a common cause against a common enemy. In this instance, moreover, the village had laid itself open to a serious charge of assault and battery which had to be fully and satisfactorily justified. Lastly, the village had a vague and slightly uneasy consciousness that their story could be better maintained on home ground than in the difficult country of the Exeter court, where all the odds would be so heavily against Harry Beer and his associates, and the specific charge against the low artist probably difficult to uphold under cross-examination.

Of the ultimate truth of the charge, no one had any doubt, inasmuch as even if there had been no actual attempt upon Mary Tebbitt's Alice, it had unquestionably been contemplated; which was, according to the Bible, every bit as bad. But the justices were curious folk who were not content to accept the simple truth from honest people, but wanted what they called "proof"; as if you could have better proof than a statement given on oath—with, possibly, the slight mental reservation that if the fellow hadn't really done the thing, he had meant to. Also, there was the question of what little Alice, herself, might say in the intimidating presence of the justices. She had had a terrible shock, poor little maid, and was in that state she

hardly knew what *had* happened, which was natural enough in the circumstances, but apt to mislead the gentry on the Bench because they could not be expected to understand these things.

Wherefore, when Tristram began his investigations on the morning after he had seen the Orpins, he found the village prepared for him.

In the interval he had said nothing to Brenda about the criminal charge that had been brought against Abby. She must not be worried unnecessarily, and it would be time enough to tell her when he was a little more sure of his ground. Also, he knew beforehand that she would not believe the story. He did not believe it himself, but he had an uncomfortable feeling that there must have been some sort of foundation for it—an origin, innocent enough, no doubt, since Abby had been in love with Brenda, and therefore incapable of such filthy behaviour, but liable to be misconstrued by the prejudiced. Abby might have wanted to paint the child, for instance; had possibly, in his preoccupied way, tried to pose her; and if the child had been frightened, as she almost certainly would have been. . . .

He decided that he would begin with Mrs. Tebbitt.

She received him with an effect of being a much injured woman, who was willing, nevertheless, to be reasonably generous; but when Tristram, ignoring the charge against Abby, asked her if she knew the names of the young men concerned in the assault, she came as near to giving her landlord

a piece of her mind as was consistent with their respective positions.

In doing this, she made no specific allegations, assuming throughout that the squire was as familiar with the facts as any one; but, while she denied all knowledge of the names of her daughter's avengers, she showed very plainly that she considered their action completely justified. There had been no need for *her*, she said, to set them on, and she never had been one to make a fuss; but if ever a man had got his deserts, that one had, and she was surprised at the *Squire's* wanting to interfere.

She had no need to elaborate that last remark, her emphasis said everything.

Tristram had no choice but to ignore that side of the question. "But are you quite sure, Mrs. Tebbitt," he asked, "that Mr. Mattocks meant anything—er—wrong when he spoke to Alice?"

"Well, sir, perhaps you'd wish to see the maid, and to ask her yourself?" Mrs. Tebbitt replied boldly.

But Tristram did not wish to do that. Brenda might, later on, quietly, waiting for an opportunity to get the child alone. For the present all he could do, himself, was to attempt another inquiry somewhere else.

It was a little after twelve when Miss Latimer and Mrs. Priestley saw him go by, looking very thoughtful and unhappy. They were in Miss Latimer's nice little bit of front garden, Miss Latimer working and her "guest" pottering

contentedly about in the sunshine and looking on.

He took off his hat as he passed, and they bowed to him, Mrs. Priestley stiffly, with the air of one who remembers a duty.

"So he knows," Miss Latimer remarked in a low voice when she judged the squire to be out of hearing.

"Naturally," Mrs. Priestley rejoined.

"But he'll never dare to *do* anything," Miss Latimer added.

Mrs. Priestley sat down on the garden seat and shut her eyes. She had a memory, although by no means a very clear one, of having been responsible for giving Mr. Wing a severe lesson, and she was now very content to have been, however humbly, the instrument of Providence.

"I only did what I thought to be right," she said.

Miss Latimer stopped working and looked at her suspiciously. Sometimes her guest's attacks began with just such a strange incongruous remark as this. On this occasion, however, Mrs. Priestley's expression appeared to be singularly benign.

"No one can do more," was Miss Latimer's cheerfully spoken reply, as she continued her work; but her thought was that whatever Mrs. P. imagined *she* could have had to do with it was beyond Miss Latimer's comprehension, and that if Mrs. P. could only find something to occupy her mind a bit, it would be better for all concerned.

Tristram was almost at the park gates when

he saw Mr. Latimer, the schoolmaster, coming towards him. He was walking very slowly, an open book in his hand to which he referred every now and again, bending over it and then raising his head, looking up at the sky and rapidly moving his lips. He might have been some ardent devotee delightfully sipping an exquisite piece of verse, but the book in this case was a Swedish grammar.

Tristram had always regarded William Latimer as a decent fellow, though queer, and no good at all at school treats and things like that. This morning he saw him for the first time in a new light, saw him, with an unquestionable flash of intuition, as a man apart from the life of the parish, wrapped in his own peculiar study, supremely uninterested in the affairs of either the great or the little world about him. There was just a chance that Latimer might be able to help, Tristram thought.

Mr. Latimer disengaged himself from his study when his squire wished him good-morning and paused with the evident intention of speaking to him, lowering his grammar with an attentive forefinger inserted between the leaves, and turning his mind with an effort to take in what was said to him.

"I say, Latimer, I wonder if you could help me in a little matter," Tristram began. "I suppose you heard of that beastly affair last Sunday week?"

Mr. Latimer remembered that that Sunday he had passed from Danish and Norwegian to Swedish, and had gone out after dinner to sit in the park, where he had expected to be undisturbed. He remembered further, that he had been disturbed,

no doubt by the "beastly affair" that was now being alluded to.

"In the afternoon?" he replied. "Some of the village youths, making a great noise on the bridge by the Home Farm? Would that be it, Mr. Wing?"

"Precisely," Tristram said. "Do you mean that you actually heard them, Latimer?"

Mr. Latimer pulled himself together. This was one of those things that had to be got over like morning school, and the more closely you gave your mind to it, the sooner the thing was done.

"Yes, Mr. Wing, I heard and partly saw them through the trees," he said. "I don't know what they were doing, and it was very soon over, but for a minute or two I was diverted from my reading."

"You made no attempt to find out what they were up to?" Tristram inquired.

"No. That never occurred to me," Mr. Latimer confessed.

"And have you any idea who the youths were?"

"Let me see, now, Beer was one and Zeal was another," Mr. Latimer replied, "because I remember pausing for a minute or two over the etymology of the names. Zeal, without doubt, is a corruption of 'salle' . . ."

"No others?" Tristram interrupted him.

"I remember no others," Mr. Latimer said, after reflection.

"Harry Beer and Nicky Zeal, I suppose?" Tristram added, the two surnames having many representatives in the village.

"I should say so; yes."

"Ah, well, thanks, Latimer, I'm much obliged to you," Tristram concluded, releasing him. "And, by the way, I shouldn't, if I were you, tell any one that you've spoken to me about it."

"On no account," Mr. Latimer agreed, and within five seconds he had completely forgotten the meeting, and was again thoughtfully sipping his Swedish grammar.

Tristram's report to Brenda that afternoon was couched in the form that he thought was least likely to worry her, and was delivered after lunch in the retirement of their usual retreat.

"Well, I've got the names of two of those fellows, B," he said. "Got them from Latimer of all people, who happened to be somewhere about, in the park, I suppose, and actually saw them. Queer beggar! Never made the least attempt to see what was going on. Said that it never occurred to him! Oh, well!

"The truth is, B, that there's a sort of conspiracy of silence in the village, as well as up at the vicarage, about this affair. They all of them pretend that they don't know who the fellows were. It was just luck my meeting Latimer and asking him. If I hadn't I shouldn't have got anything.

"And—this doesn't worry you, does it, old girl?—they've got up a cock-and-bull story about Abby's having made indecent advances to little Alice Tebbitt. Whether he ever spoke to her, asked her to sit for him or anything of that sort, I

don't know ; but anyway they've worked it up into a regular scandal. Got it from the Orpins, in the first place, yesterday evening, but I thought I wouldn't say anything to you till I had found out something more about it.

"The infernal part of it is that even though there mayn't be a single grain of truth in the story, even if Abby has never so much as *seen* the child, you can't possibly prove it against the evidence of the whole parish. They won't commit themselves to a date, probably, and won't need to. And even if they did, it's a thousand to one against Abby's being able to prove an alibi, seeing that for a fortnight before the row, he was alone all day on the bridge. They'd probably say it happened there.

"Well, I'm looking at it from the point of view they'll have to take on the Bench if we prosecute these chaps and they bring up this story in defence. I couldn't sit myself, obviously, and I can see old Pierce believing that story out of hand. He's got a nose for things of that kind. And Abby's appearance and all that, would go dead against him.

"I'm afraid, you know, B, that the chances of a police prosecution afterwards would be pretty considerable, and though we'd have counsel at the Quarter Sessions and might make some of the witnesses look pretty silly in the box, it wouldn't be any too easy to get him off ; and, anyway, is it worth the risk ? "

Brenda had listened quietly and with scarcely a change of expression to all that he had to say,

but as he paused reflectively after the last sentence, she said :

" *You* don't believe it, do you, Tristram ? "

" No ! Quite definitely, I don't," he replied. " Last night at the Orpins' I was doubtful for a bit, but since I've come to think about it, I'm certain it isn't true. What I'm not sure about is whether the people down there believe it themselves."

" Probably they do," Brenda said.

" Point is, darling, what do you want me to do about it ? " he asked.

" Leave it alone. Leave it absolutely alone," she said. " Abby is going the day after to-morrow, and father and mother on Friday ; after that we shall have a little peace. I feel that I only want to be let alone, just now."

" Rather," Tristram agreed. " Though I do feel frightfully riled over the whole affair. We've been so absolutely in the right all through, and yet we've got the worst of it every time."

XIII

THE MONKEY-PUZZLE

I

AFTER Abby and the Fullertons had gone, Brenda sighed her relief and told herself that now she could devote her thoughts to her family with an undivided mind. There, in the island of the Hall, surrounded by its protecting park from the interference of the outside world, she would be able to find that tranquillity of mind she believed to be so essential for her during the next few months.

September that year was a prolongation of summer rather than the beginning of autumn. The earth was brown, the grass scorched, and throughout the southern and midland counties the fields adjoining the railway were blackened with fire. But the trees in the park were still green with the brightness of summer, and the shortening of the days and the increasing shadow of the poplar in the afternoon were her only reminders of the falling year.

And at first it seemed to her that she had found the peace she sought. She was, it is true, aware of a restlessness that was new to her, a desire to be actively engaged with the children, about the house or the garden, or, when physical rest was necessary, in reading some book that demanded her whole

attention. But she could, she believed, account for that. Partly this restlessness was a symptom of her condition and partly a natural reaction after the mental crises of the past six weeks. She was happy, she assured herself, perfectly happy. There was no reason why she should not be happy.

The only thing that puzzled and rather disquieted her was a curious sense of emptiness that came now and again, when she awoke in the morning, or when, as sometimes happened in the course of the day, her thoughts strayed from whatever she had in hand and she would come back to a realisation of the thing she was doing with no recollection of what she had thought in the interval. At those times it seemed to her, for a moment, as if her life were desolate and meaningless, as if her future held nothing but the prospect of a routine of mechanical enjoyment that would lessen year by year as she sank into the insensitiveness of old age.

And, unhappily, try as she would to explain them away and discourage them, those moments came more and more frequently, merging by imperceptible degrees into her mental life until she became uneasily aware of being surrounded by something inimical that she dared not face, that she was very steadfastly trying to keep at a distance, something that, despite her endeavours, approached continually nearer and nearer.

2

Abby had not written to Brenda since he left. No one had expected that he would. He had gone away, apparently in good spirits, although there had been in his expression a hint of that rather grim amusement which had an effect of foreboding some subtle mischief.

The first news of him came to Tristram in a letter from Gregor Keynes in the second week of October. Brenda had stayed in bed to breakfast that morning.

"MY DEAR WING," Tristram read, "I am writing to you rather than to your wife, as I am afraid my news may be rather a shock to her and I thought it better that it should come through you. Well, I am no sort of good with a pen, I must confess (nor with a brush either, according to poor Mattocks!), and I do not know how to put this thing properly. I am, as you will guess, genuinely distressed by his death. . . ."

Tristram laid the letter down at that point and thanked Heaven that that good fellow Keynes had had the tact and the good sense not to write to Brenda herself in the first instance. It might be better to keep this from her altogether for a time, possibly until after the child was born? He wished to God that time were safely over. She had not, in spite of all her protestations, been quite herself for the last few weeks.

He sighed, picked up the letter again, and

continued: “. . . by his death, of which this will probably be your first intimation. He was a genius without doubt, and a most extraordinary fellow, and I had hoped that the rest and quiet he would get with you and your wife would put him on his feet again. However, I am afraid that there was no saving him. The extraordinary part of the affair was that he sent for me when he was on his last legs. I had just got back from Norway, and I went up to see him as soon as I got his letter. It was obviously all U.P. with him then, I am sorry to say. The doctor, whom I saw, said it was general debility, that he'd worn himself right out, but I believe the actual cause of death was put down as ‘heart failure’ on the certificate.

“Well, my dear Wing, the real point of what I had to say was that poor Mattocks sent for me, as far as I can make out, in order that I might send the sad news on to you. He said he would like you to know—that was the way he put it—but I was not to write to you until it was all over. Of course, I wanted to write to you at once, but he put me off that by asking me to come again the next day—he said he was too tired to argue then—and when I went back this morning he was dead.

“I am dreadfully grieved about the whole affair, as you will guess, and I know you will be, too. I have often wondered how he got on with you all, down at Zeal-Afford. But I hope we may meet soon and then you can tell me and I shall be able to give you a fuller account of my last sight of him. I never saw a man look so utterly played out.

"By the way, I shall not post this until after the funeral, which is to be the day after to-morrow at Finchley, as he made rather a point of me not letting you know before then.

"Frightfully sorry, my dear Wing, to be the bearer of such bad news. . . ."

"No," Tristram reflected, "Keynes was as he had said, 'no sort of good with the pen,' and yet from the material in his letter, Brenda would probably get a vivid, a far too vivid, impression of the circumstances of Abby's death. Would it not be better to keep it from her just now?"

He re-folded the letter, replaced it in the envelope, and noted that it had been posted in Finchley the day before. Keynes had scrupulously followed his instructions. That was like Keynes. He was almost too conscientious.

Now he must go up and see Brenda, but for the present he would say nothing to her of the news he had had that morning.

He found her sitting up in bed, reading, but she closed her book as he entered the room and turned to him at once with a look of inquiry.

"Well?" she said, as if she expected something.

"Well!" he returned, sitting down on the edge of the bed and ruefully conscious that he was "a shocking bad actor." "Well what, old girl?"

She was watching him, closely, anxiously. "I'm not sure," she said. "I had a feeling as I heard you coming that something was wrong. You came so slowly. And now I can see it in your face. It's

nothing in the house, I know. What letters have you had? Tell me, darling. I can see perfectly well that you're going to try to keep something from me, and, believe me, I'd sooner know."

For an instant he had a wild idea of inventing some story to pacify her, but his imagination was not equal to the task. She would, he knew, see through him at once.

"I've had a letter from Gregor Keynes," he said. "About Abby."

"D'you mean that he's dead?" she asked, and when he nodded, added, "I expected it. Let me see Gregor's letter."

She read it attentively, but with no sign of any strong emotion, and when she had finished, laid it down on the coverlet and said, "You were afraid that this would be a shock to me, dear?"

"I was, rather," he admitted.

"It isn't," she said. "I helped to kill him, I know, and I am more to blame than any one because I knew what I was doing, but I was absolutely helpless. Life was too strong for me. Life was far, far too strong for me."

Tristram was watching her wistfully, perplexedly. "Darling old girl, it wasn't your fault in any sort of way," he remonstrated.

She smiled at him, rather sadly. "Let me get this out, dear," she said. "I have been fighting to keep it down for a month, and it has been bad for me. Now this has happened, I can face it. But, Tristram, we'll have to go away from here, until after the baby's born at least."

"You feel that, do you?" he replied.

"Don't you?" she asked.

"I? Well, yes, I think I do," he said. "I don't know that I'd got quite as far as having made up my mind to it. But I've been feeling the last week or two that things are different in some way. I would—yes, I'd like to get away for a time. Where shall we go?"

"South," she replied at once. "Biarritz, or Spain perhaps. This summer has given me a taste for the sun. But, Tristram, first of all, I want to talk to you about this," she laid her hand on Gregor Keynes' letter. "I want to—to understand."

3

"It wasn't a shock to me, this morning," Brenda explained, "because it really happened a month ago. We all combined to kill him, you and the children and the Orpins and the village, every one; but I passed sentence on him. I knew, I must have known then, that he wouldn't live very long after that.

"But I'm not blaming myself, not for that. It wasn't only merely as if I were *unwilling* to sacrifice myself and you and the children to him; it was that I wasn't able to.

"I don't quite know what happened to me on that memorable night that began it all. I don't even know whether it was something that happened to me, and I had a glimpse of another state

of being, or if all my feelings were really nothing more than an echo of his. I woke him up that night, and all that he did afterwards until the time his picture was destroyed was due to that. Those six weeks were the consummation of his life, and in them he produced a masterpiece. Its destruction completed the circle; because if it hadn't been for that night, there would probably have been no scandal and no tragedy. But then, if it hadn't been for that night, there would have been no masterpiece. Can *you* make any sense of it? "

Tristram shook his head. "I suppose we mustn't expect to make *sense* of it," he said. "Not what we mean by sense."

"Darling, you're very wise sometimes," she replied, "and I do agree with you about that. If there is any meaning in it, it's beyond us. And that does, in a way, comfort me, because it makes me feel that as regards Abby, I was only a puppet. There were things I had to do, just as there were other things I could never have done. Providence, or whatever it was, used me for its own inscrutable purpose and then threw me aside. But when I was left to myself. . . .

"But, Tristram, about this other thing, about the village and us and all the rest of it, we can do something and perhaps understand a little. I want, you know, dear, to try again. Not just yet, for many reasons, but after the baby's born. I have learnt something out of all this. I've found out that I was wrong in my silly little philosophy. I

made it an excuse to cut myself off from life. Now I am beginning to understand that it isn't enough to abstain from preaching your own gospel ; you've got to try to understand theirs. What do you think ? ”

Tristram got up and took a pace or two up and down the room. He could think better when he was walking.

“ It's like this, B,” he began after a short silence, during which she waited patiently for him to speak. “ You remember my calling this the monkey-puzzle ? Well, I've got about as far, up to now, as finding out that that wasn't a bad name for it, and if I'd applied it sooner I might have done better. It's a good name, old girl, because we're all of us so infernally afraid of being touched by anything that's going to interfere with our own ways of doing things or thinking about them.

“ For instance, I got all my bristles up when Abby came back. I felt that he was dangerous to me, and I pretty soon dropped my thinking and all the rest of it so far as he was concerned. I was all spikes for a bit. So I was with the Orpins and the villagers.

“ Then, you've pretty well admitted, haven't you, that you've been keeping people off, in much the same sort of way ? And Lord, there's no need to go on to the Orpins and all the rest of them. Isn't it true, B, that we do, most of us, get a set of opinions and a notion of how we think things ought to be done, and then cover ourselves up in armour with spikes all over, to keep every one else

off? It isn't very well put, I know, but you know what I mean."

"Oh, yes. I know," Brenda said. "But is there any remedy?"

"I can't see any," Tristram confessed. "The moment you try to handle the cursed thing, you prick your fingers. We've pricked ours pretty badly as it is, with the result that we've all got to go away until our wounds are healed."

"I don't know. It rather seems to me that the best thing to do is to live what you think yourself is an honest, decent sort of life, and leave other people alone."

"But, darling!" Brenda exclaimed, "that's just the point of view that I've had to give up!"

He smiled as he said, "Well, I'm always sure to be a step or two behind you, B."

She shook her head. "No, that won't do, darling," she replied. "I refuse absolutely, after this, to set up my opinion against yours. I *won't* be a horrible tree that you can't touch."

"I suppose you can get over it?" he asked thoughtfully.

"Anyway, let's try," Brenda said.

4

Mrs. Orpin saw the announcement in *The Times* just before lunch.

"So the Wings have got an heir," she said to the vicar; "born on the first of May."

"Dear me, I'm very glad to hear it," he returned absent-mindedly.

His wife looked at him with a touch of contempt. He had been ageing very rapidly during the last six months.

"I dare say they'll be coming back to the Hall after this," she remarked.

"Ah, yes, quite probably, I should say," was her husband's only comment. He seemed to take no interest in anything nowadays.

That afternoon she went to tea with Mrs. Priestley and Miss Latimer.

"I suppose you've seen the news," she said. "Mrs. Wing has got a son; born on the first of May!"

Miss Latimer caught her eye, and moved a little nearer to the tea-table.

"The first of May," she repeated, as if she found something exceedingly suspicious about that date.

After that they both looked inquiringly at Mrs. Priestley.

She had been much better lately. It was some months now since her last "attack."

"Hm!" she said, pinching her lips and nodding her head; and then she, too, drew her chair a little nearer.

"Now, let me see," Miss Latimer continued, "I've such a poor head for dates, but wasn't it . . ."

"Well, well, Miss Latimer, perhaps we'd better not go *too* closely into that," Mrs. Orpin interrupted her. "But I do remember that that terrible

artist protégé, or whatever he was, of Mrs. Wing's, came back to the Hall in the third week of July . . ."

The three women drew closer still over the tea-table, and their voices fell to a sibilant, excited whisper.

Any one who had looked in through the window might have imagined that they were bending over their food, eating voraciously, their heads nodding and bobbing.

Messrs.

COLLINS'

Latest Novels



*Messrs. COLLINS will always be glad to send
their book lists regularly to readers who will
send name and address.*

Crown 8vo.

7/6 net

Cloth

THE GREEN HAT

A ROMANCE FOR A FEW PEOPLE

MICHAEL ARLEN

HAS PROVED THE BOOK OF THE YEAR

TWENTY-FOUR THOUSAND

SOLD IN TEN WEEKS

RECENT SUCCESSES

Woodsmoke F. BRETT YOUNG

Third Printing

Jim Antrim, an officer in the King's African Rifles, when at Mombasa on his way home for leave, made the acquaintance of Mr. and Mrs. Rawley, who were just out from England. The former, a plebeian boor in appearance, and cursed with a vicious temper, was madly in love with his wife; the latter an aristocrat and unhappy. Urged partly by the ever closer spell which Africa was casting upon him, and partly by an obscure feeling towards the Rawleys, which defied analysis, Antrim cancels his passage, and sets out with them exploring in German East Africa. From the very start the expedition is cursed by bad luck, and to the ever increasing difficulties and dangers it entailed was added an ever increasing tension in the relationship of the three. The story rises sombrely and passionately to a superbly seen and described climax, one of the vividest scenes in all Mr. Brett Young's work.

Unity

J. D. BERESFORD

In *Unity* Mr. Beresford examines the difficult problem of a psychic affinity between a man and a woman. The Unity of his title—the name she gave herself in childhood, when 19 years of age, saw the face of a man in a railway carriage, which made on her a most potent and lasting impression. The man was quite unknown to her, but he had inspired in her, in those few seconds, an entirely different feeling from anything else she had ever experienced. Later, she revealed herself as a woman of genius. She married and travelled widely. She lost her first husband, and then, on going on the stage, achieved a great success. Later she abandoned the Theatre to marry again, all the time haunted by the memory of the Unknown. One day she meets him, then the great crisis of her life comes.

